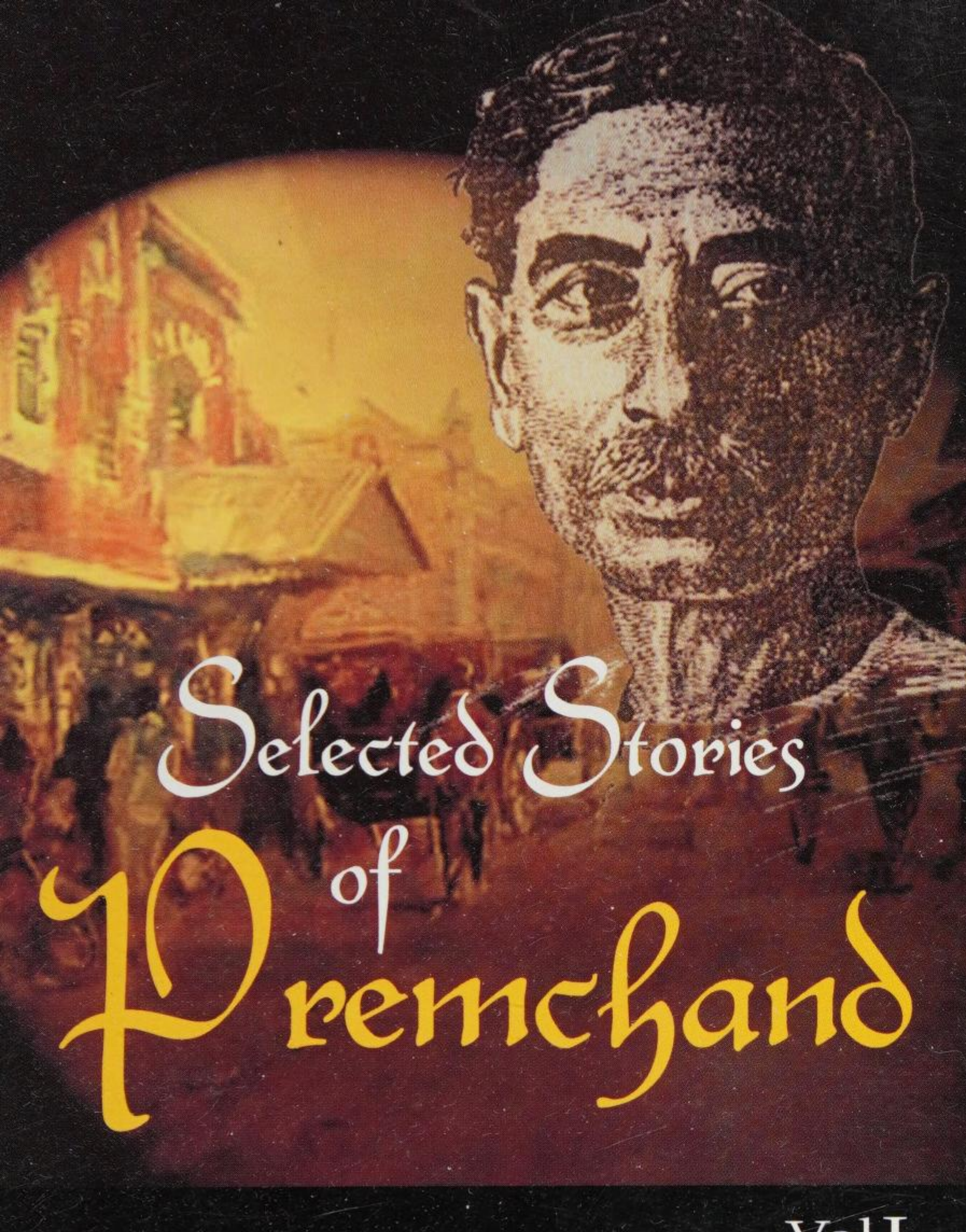

Selected Stories of Premchand

Vol I

Sushil Malik
Rakesh Bhasin

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of
Premchand
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Rakesh Bhasin

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Dedicated to the

Memory of Premchand

Preface

Munshi Premchand was a giant of Indian literature. We present here the translation of some of the stories written by him. He wrote in Urdu and Hindi and had a masterly understanding of rural and urban ethos of India. In general, his stories have a moral dimension. Behind the interplay of greed, lust, ambition and sadism, there is always a latent moral message that the goodness and truth shall ultimately prevail.

Every language is a product of social and cultural milieu stamped by the values, norms and mores of the particular epoch. The language in large ways is symbolic of the peculiarity of a civilization and culture. The literature of a language cannot be translated into another language without some violence to its basic structure. Even Sir Edwin Arnold accepted the inadequacy of his efforts when he presented the world with his masterly translation of Jaidev's Geet Govind. He said, "If I had been able to distill one tenth of the beauty of original Sanskrit, I would consider myself fortunate."

We are pigmies compared to Premchand but we have tried to present the essence of his stories and the mood of that period to today's English speaking readers. We have endeavoured to retain the essential integrity of his characters. At times it has been difficult because of changing social mores as we do not presently place

as much emphasis on certain customs and beliefs which were prevalent a century ago. We have tried to explain this by way of footnotes and small introductory notes at the beginning of stories wherever required. This is also to make the context familiar to the reader.

There is a message in Premchand's stories. They capture the spirit of the times, which no book on history can adequately claim to do. We have immensely enjoyed reading Premchand in Hindi in our school days and do sincerely believe that the younger generation should not be deprived of this rich and noble heritage. With these words we place the treasure in your hands.

New Delhi

Sushil Malik
Rakesh Bhasin

About Munshi Premchand

Munshi Premchand was a great novelist and storywriter in Hindi and Urdu. His name is foremost in Hindi literature. His original name was Dhanpat Rai. He was born in the village Lamahi near Banaras on 31st July 1880 where his father worked as a clerk in the post office. Premchand lost his parents when he was very young — his mother died when he was eight and his father died when he was seventeen and still a student. After his father's death the responsibility of caring for his stepmother and stepsiblings fell on him.

Early in life, Premchand faced immense poverty and hardship. His meagre earnings amounted to rupees five a month which he earned by tutoring a lawyer's child. The penury and want made studying very difficult for him and yet he matriculated. Initially he worked as a teacher and later on he got a job as the deputy inspector of schools in Uttar Pradesh, then called the United Province.

His compilation of short stories titled *'Soz-e-Watan'* (Dirge of the Nation) was considered seditious by the then alien government and was proscribed. After this event he assumed the pen name 'Premchand'. He also wrote in Urdu under the name of 'Nawab Rai' and for sometime under the pseudonym 'Bambook'.

Premchand got married early as per the prevalent custom. The marriage was unhappy and unsuccessful. His second marriage was to a widow Shivarani Devi, widow remarriage at that time was a revolutionary step. He had three children Sripat Rai, Amrit Rai and Kamla Devi.

Premchand has created the largest number of characters in contemporary Indian literature. His characters portray the social reality of an inequitable hierarchical society with all the harshness and angularities of an egalitarian society. Yet all that he portrays is not darkness and despondency. Premchand is an incorrigible optimist. In darkness also he could still find the nobility of human soul and the hope for an unseen future.

Premchand's *'Shatranj ke Khiladi'* (The Chess Players) and *'Sadgati'* have been filmed by the incomparable Satyajit Ray. His *'Sevasadan'* was made into film with M S Subulakshmi in lead role. In spite of all his wants and virtual destitution he never compromised with commercialism that cinema demands and he died a poor man in the year 1936.

We, in the modern generation are largely oblivious of the great wealth he left for us. This translation is a modest attempt to reclaim the heritage.

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The Procession
(*Juloos*)

Introduction

Winston Churchill once stated that, "History, with its flickering lamp, stumbles along the trail of the past, reconstructing old scenes, reviving old echoes and rekindling with pale gleams, the passion of former days."

This story of Premchand succeeds in doing more than that. It pertains to the period, which marked the beginning of the end of British Empire. The story reflects the mood of a nation rediscovering its identity, dignity and pride. The man responsible for this was Mahatma Gandhi, the naked faqir. He combined in him the compassion of Buddha, the egalitarianism of Mohammad and used the sacrificing spirit of Jesus as a weapon of his non-violent war. This one man awakened the entire India. He strengthened the moral fibre of the citizens so that they could stand up to the mightiest power on the earth without a sword or a shield in hand. The story also tells us that no man can be a traitor to his motherland if he knows that he will fall in the esteem of his piers.

The Indian National Congress had declared its goal of complete independence. There was a non-violent procession in the streets but not many people were participating in the procession. The procession consisted of a few young men, some old men and a few children. They carried a banner and flags indicating their commitment to the new goal. The slogan on everyone's mouth was *Vande Mataram,* which means we bow in honour of our motherland. They passed through the prominent roads of the city. On both sides of the road, there stood a large number of spectators not necessarily sharing the commitment of the procession. They had mostly come to witness and enjoy the spectacle.

Shambhunath was standing in front of his shop. He turned to his neighbour Deendayal and said, "All these people are courting disaster. Soon the Mounted Police shall arrive and whip them red and blue."

"Mahatma Gandhi has become senile. We could have got independence by now, if it was possible by taking out processions. And just look! Do you notice that there is not a single important person in the procession? Only vagabonds and crazy people have joined this procession," said Deendayal.

One of the onlookers was Maiku, who was considered somewhat odd in his ways and was always

high on cannabis. He looked strange with a garland of rags and shoes around his neck. He laughed loudly and derisively on hearing the two shopkeepers.

Shambhu asked, "Why are you laughing Maiku? It appears that you had an overdose of cannabis."

Maiku replied, "Your statement that there is no important person in the procession has made me laugh. Why should an important person join this procession? What is the comfort that they don't have under the British rule? They live in big bungalows and palaces, possess big motorcars and enjoy dinners with white rulers. What they lacking? It is we who are under misery, under the foreign rule and don't know when and where we would get our next meal. The important persons must be busy playing tennis or having tea or enjoying music or strolling in the *company-bagh*. Who will come here for getting whip-lashed by the police? You don't understand what you said."

"You wouldn't understand, Maiku. When four or so important people resolve and strive to get a job done, the government is really impressed and positive result follows. What is the value of youngsters and urchins in the eyes of the rulers?" said Shambhu.

Maiku did not say anything but merely looked at the shopkeepers with eyes which seemed to convey, "You don't have the exclusive right to understand all the aspects of such matters." He then uttered, "The important men get their importance from us only. You may be aware that there are many people who have become prominent simply because we, the ordinary people, helped them to become so. Now they have got bungalows and cars. Their status has risen and they think that they are superior people and we are inferior. This is nature's way that whosoever rises in status,

wealth and prominence, forgets and ignores his erstwhile friends. The really important man for us is Mahatma Gandhi who moves without shoes and without clothes except for a small loin cloth. We are devoted to the man who is risking his life for our sake. We are not bothered about any so-called important man. In reality, these important and prominent persons are the cause of our misery and ruin. They dance to the tune of the government, which duly rewards them."

The procession moved on. Deendayal remarked, "The new SHO[1] is a real devil. The moment the procession reaches the main square, he is going to pounce upon them with his baton. Then, everyone of them is going to run away with their tail between the legs. It will be real fun."

Intoxicated with the spirit of freedom, the procession reached the main city-square. Their path was blocked by a large contingent of Mounted Police. The SHO Birbal Singh, riding his horse, moved to the front of the procession and declared that the procession would not be allowed to move further.

The procession was led by a veteran leader, Ibrahim Ali[2]. He moved little ahead and said, "I assure you that this is a peaceful procession. We are not here to indulge in rioting nor we are here to loot shops or engage in any act of incendiary or vandalism. Our goal is much higher."

---

1. Station House Officer
2. Ibrahim also called Abraham is the name of a prophet, who is considered to be the progenitor of all the major Semitic religions viz Jews, Muslims and Christians. Ali was the son-in-law and cousin of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). He was also the fourth caliph and is called the defender of faith. With the names of these two great persons combined in his name, he could not do anything unbecoming.

"I have got orders to ensure that the procession doesn't move further." "You may kindly ask your senior officers to review the order."

"I don't feel any necessity of this."

"Then we will sit down here and proceed further after you leave."

"You are not allowed to stay here. You must turn back."

"We are not going to turn back. No one has the right to stop us. You want to stop us with your Mounted Police, guns and bayonets. You can try but cannot turn us back. I am waiting for the day when our fellow brethren will not stoop to implement the orders of the foreign government, which are intended to keep us in shackles," Ibrahim said gravely.

Birbal was a graduate. The level of education of normal persons during that period was much lower. His father had already risen to the rank of Superintendent of Police. He felt that he was born to command. His seniors had high regards for him. He had a good built, fair complexion, blue eyes and brown hair. He looked more like a British than a native Indian. When he got dressed in the western attire complete with a hat on his head, he tended to forget that he was the son of the native soil. He considered himself to be a part of the ruling class.

The derision inherent in Ibrahim's words shamed him for a moment. It was a critical time for him. If he were to allow the procession to proceed, he would be answerable to higher authorities. Neither could he allow the procession to continue there, it may become an endless wait. While he was debating over the issue in his mind, he saw the DSP[3] coming on his horse. Now,

---

3. Deputy Superintendent of Police.

there was time no to think but act. Now was the time to show results. He directed the Mounted Police to move towards the procession unmindful of the damage the hooves of the horses could do to the innocent participants of the procession. He took his baton and spurred his horse to move into the procession. Seeing him do so, the entire mounted police moved forward. Birbal took his horse in front of Ibrahim and hit his head very strongly with his baton. The old man was stunned and felt as if his head was spinning like a top. He could not keep standing and sat down with his head clasped in his hands. The horse moved ahead raising its two front legs and lowering the hooves on Ibrahim. Nobody was allowed to move. The men of the Mounted Police were mercilessly moving through the procession and hitting them with batons as cruelly as they could. The hands of the defenders moved to stop the blows but their legs did not move to run away. They kept standing, remaining non-violent in spite of such provocations, though it was becoming increasingly difficult. Due to continuous provocation there was every temptation to cross the mental barrier against self-imposed retaliatory violence. But everyone knew that the destiny and hopes of lakhs of people were intricately linked with what they did or failed to do. There was a common thought in everyone's mind. "We are on the path of freedom, if we turn back now, how can we talk about freedom again."

No one thought of saving his life or limbs. No one thought of running away. This was not a procession of hired lackeys gathered to enrich themselves. Here was a group of selfless Indians inebriated with the spirit of freedom, entirely aware of its commitment and responsibility. It was a large group; it could have turned

violent and hit back. The provocation was immense. Many had been hit on heads, hands and the rest of the body and were wounded. The oozing blood from the wounds did not stop the attackers nor did it turn away the defenders from the path of non-violence. There legs were shackled, these shackles were not made of iron but of the highest tenets of ethics, faith and idealism.

* * * *

The news of this massive violence spread like fire, in the market and rest of the city. People came to know that Ibrahim was crushed under a horse, many had been wounded, many had their hands broken resisting the blows and yet, no one turned back.

Maiku got excited and said, "Now I can no longer stay here. I will go and join the procession." Deendayal also wanted to do so. Shambhu was initially reluctant. Then he also closed his shop and said, "One day all of us have to die. Whatever has to happen let it happen. After all Ibrahim Ali and others are sacrificing their lives for all of us."

In no time, most of the shops closed. The people, who only ten minutes earlier were enjoying the spectacle, left everything and proceeded to join the procession where it was stopped and men were being brutally beaten. There were thousands who did so. Those who joined later were not restrained by idealism or principles. They were full of anger and were willing to kill and be killed. Many of them had batons in their hands and many others were carrying stones to throw at police. No one was talking to anyone, no one asking anyone. Everyone had the same aim, to take revenge. The multitude moved like an ominous storm. The Mounted Police became apprehensive on seeing the

approaching mob. Birbal Singh lost his nerve and the DSP left the scene in his car. It is easy to hit cruelly the persons resolutely committed to peace and non-violence. It is not easy to face a mob mad with fury. The Mounted Police left.

While Ibrahim was sitting with his head bent and supported by his hands, Birbal's horse had lowered its one front foot on his bowed back. He was badly injured and fainted. The noise raised by the mob which had gathered, woke him up from his coma. He managed to ask a boy called Kailash, " How many people comprise the mob."

Kailash assessed the mob and said, "Must be thousands."

"It is too bad, let us turn back. The situation is really stormy. We don't want any violence against our fellow Indians even when they have betrayed us." Saying this, Ibrahim Ali wanted to get up but he was too wounded to do so.

Others from the procession gathered some bamboo sticks, some pieces of cloth and made a make-shift stretcher. They lifted Ibrahim and placed him on the stretcher and turned back. This turning back was not a defeat, some people may think it to be a defeat, but.they are mistaken. It was an epic victory. They knew that their struggle is against their own brethren whose perception of self-interest was somewhat different and myopic. They did not want to bear any ill will against them. They did not want a situation of riot or anarchy. They did not want that people should go around looting shops and breaking heads. Their victory comprised in winning the sympathy and fraternal feeling from other Indians. The same people who a little while ago derisively laughed at them were now their partners in

a common struggle, with all the patience and courage at their command. The freedom fighters were not interested in conventional war or skirmishes. Their aim was to change the mindset of their brethren. They knew that when they achieved this aim, that would be the dawn of freedom.

* * * *

Three days passed. SHO Birbal Singh was sitting in his house and sipping tea. His wife was standing in front of him, holding their child in her arms.

Birbal said, "What could I have done? The DSP was watching. I would have ruined my career if I had allowed the procession to move."

Mitthan Bai did not agree and said, "The least you would have done was to avoid hitting them with batons. Do you get your salary for hitting innocent people with batons? Your task was at best limited to stop them. You seem to really enjoy hitting people. Isn't it?"

Birbal Singh shamefacedly said, "You wouldn't understand?"

Mitthan Bai continued, "I do understand. The DSP was standing close by. It was a lifetime opportunity for you to impress him. You thought that you might not get another opportunity to impress him. Do you think the procession comprised of the poor penniless people? There were many people in the procession who can afford to employ people of your background and education as household servants. Many of them were more educated than you. You had the audacity to hit them with batons and move your horses on those non-violent persons. You think that this was really an act of bravery!"

Birbal smiled shamelessly inspite of the taunt and

said, "You know, the DSP has really noted my name."

SHO Birbal Singh was of the opinion that good deeds and conduct are meant only for impressing people. When one talks of good deeds, righteous conduct or gentlemanliness, it is only meant for public consumption. No one earnestly means what he says. Self-interest lies deep in the core of our hearts. It is the only thing which is important. He thought that this information of the DSP having noted his name favourably would please Mitthan Bai.

But Mitthan Bai was not pleased. The righteousness which is supposed to be only on the surface of our beings had permeated the core of Mitthan Bai's heart. She said, "No doubt he would have noted your name for early promotion but don't forget that your hands are soiled with the blood of innocent people. Don't forget that this will not be an award for your good deeds but an award for your treachery to your own country. You deserve a promotion only when you locate and punish a murderer or save a person from sinking in the river."

At this time a constable walked up to the verandah in front of the house and said, "Sir, someone has brought a message for you in this envelope."

Birbal went out to receive the envelope, opened it and took out the letter.. After reading it, he silently kept it aside.

Mitthan Bai asked, "Is it the promotion order?"

Birbal was embarrassed and said, "You are really pulling my leg. Today there is another procession being taken out. I have been ordered to keep a watch."

Mitthan Bai, "Oh, this is really wonderful! Another opportunity for you to impress the superiors. You will get many victims! You can beat them and impress the DSP again. Now there is no doubt about your soon

becoming an Inspector."

Birbal Singh was then in the rank of Sub Inspector. Birbal wrinkled his forehead in annoyance and said, "Sometimes you really talk nonsense. If I keep on standing without taking any action, I will be considered incompetent and somebody else will be tasked with the job. They may even suspect of my having sympathies with freedom fighters. If that happens, I am ruined. Even if they don't dismiss me, they may attach me with the headquarters as an act of punishment. A person has to understand realistically the circumstances and act accordingly. I may not be a very wise man but I do know that these people want to bring a transformation for the country and the people. I also know that the idea of freedom fighters is not acceptable to the alien government and it wants to crush the idea. I am not an ass to take pride in a life of servitude but where is the choice?"

At this point, the call-bell rang. Birbal went out and asked the waiting constable as to what was the matter. He was told that the procession of freedom fighters had already started. He immediately dressed in his uniform with epaulets and headgear. He put his pistol in the holster and rode to the procession site with policemen marching behind him on foot and horsebacks.

* * * *

In fifteen minutes they reached the site where the procession was to start. Seeing the police there was a spontaneous shout of *Vande Mataram* from a thousand throats; heavens appeared to reverberate. Then, there was silence. There was difference between this procession and the previous one. The previous procession was a celebration of dawn of freedom; this

procession was tinged with the agony and the pain of the death of a martyr.

After three days of high fever and excruciating pain the old leader, Ibrahim Ali, had died. He was a man who never clamoured for any personal benefit, who never bowed his head before any political authority. He had declared in his last will and testament that his mortal remains should be bathed in the water of Ganges before being entombed. There should be the flag symbolizing India's freedom, always fluttering on his *mazar*[4]. The news of his death had reached every nook and corner of the city. Everyone was pained. Everyone felt that the loss, the pain, the sorrow was theirs. Everyone was tormented as if the wounds that bled were on their body. Everyone ran to have a last glimpse of the noble person. The entire market was closed. People had moved by horse-carts, rickshaws and on foot to join the funeral procession. Everyone had eyes, sad and swollen with tears. Birbal Singh instructed his constables and footmen to move in a single file keeping a distance of five yards[5] between one policemen and the next one. They were to move along with the procession. He himself decided to follow the procession on horseback. At the end of the procession, for fifty yards, there were only women. Birbal could not believe his eyes at what he saw. He looked again. He was not mistaken. It was definitely Mitthan Bai in the procession. She also looked at him and turned away her eyes. There was a mixture of pain, hate, derision and shame in her eyes. Birbal Singh understood what the eyes conveyed unsaid. He had never felt so ashamed, so helpless, so humiliated, and so weak in his own esteem.

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4. A memorial place built around the tomb of the deceased.
5. Four and a half meters

Suddenly a woman turned to the SHO and taunted, "Please don't start beating us with batons. We are really afraid of you."

Another woman said, "It was one of your colleagues who had mercilessly attacked the noble man."

Mitthan said," It was none of his colleagues, it is the same man who carried out the atrocious act."

The scores of voices said, "Oh, is he the same great man? Sir, we really bow before you. It is because of your great act of compassion that we have come to have a look at your historic baton."

Birbal looked towards Mitthan Bai with a glance which had the sharpness of a spear but could not speak a word. Another woman said, "We are planning a grand function to honour you and sing paeans in your praise after publicly garlanding you."

Yet another woman remarked, "He is really a handsome man, so fair, so much like a British!"

An old woman said contemptuously, "If such a child was born of my womb I could have twisted his neck immediately after birth while cutting the placenta."

Another woman joined in making fun of the SHO, seeming to address the old woman she said, "You are wrong old mother, he has to be loyal to the British. Even the dogs are loyal to their master, after all he is getting his salary from them."

The old woman was full of contempt and went on to say that he was a man who had become blind with self-interest. Birbal had heard enough. He moved somewhat away. When a man says something derogatory we get angry, when a woman decides to taunt us we feel small. Birbal Singh had no moral courage to face the women. He felt anger at his

superiors. He wondered why he was being picked up for these types of jobs. There were other colleagues of his who could be sent on such jobs sometimes. He felt that his officers considered him as a man with no feelings.

His mind went on thinking. He felt that his wife must be considering him a coward and a mean person. He felt that his wife is so angry with him that she would not even object if someone were to kill him. Maybe she would be happy at his death. He was also afraid that somebody might go and tell the DSP that his wife had marched as a part of the procession. It would really damage his career. He went on thinking, "Mitthi knows and understands everything, yet she has decided to join the procession. She is not the least bothered. Here, in this procession, everybody seems to be without any worry. There are students, there are labourers, workers, what worry can they have? What they have to lose? Worry and misery is only for those who have to be bothered about their status and decent upkeep of their families. The women are staring at me with such hateful looks that could kill."

The funeral procession moved on through the main roads of the city. People were standing on both sides of the road, on the roofs and balconies of the houses and even on the treetops. Birbal Singh could see on their faces a new agility, a new enthusiasm, a new pride. He felt as if even the trees shared the enthusiasm of the men and the pride of the women. There was a thrill in the air. After all they were moving on the path of freedom. They knew their aim. They knew what was at the end of the journey. They didn't have to meander in an aimless manner. In future, they would not have to cry with heads bowed. The golden dawn of freedom

was visible in the distant horizon. People were not bothered about the impediments on the way. Everyone eagerly wanted to achieve the fond object of desire.

By eleven the procession reached the riverbank. The cortege was lowered and the body of the martyr was taken for the ceremonial bath in water of the Ganges. The face of the deceased looked tranquil and pale. The wound made by the baton was clearly visible on the forehead. The blood had congealed to a black hue. His long hair had been soaked with blood, which had congealed too and the hair looked like an artist's brush when the paint sets on it. There were thousands of people waiting and eager to have a last glimpse of the deceased. They were coming in orderly queues. Birbal Singh was sitting on his horse at a distance. He could see the wound caused by his baton. His sleeping conscience now hurt him. He could no longer look at the dead body. He turned his face away. His thoughts changed. He thought that here was a man, hundreds of thousands of people are eagerly waiting to touch the dust of his feet and I'm the one who hurt and humiliated him and became the cause of his death. The core of his being now accepted that when he hit this noble person cruelly with the baton, it was an act of selfishness. It was an act to earn the favour of his bosses. He knew that a thousand eyes were looking at him with contempt and anger. He could not look back.

A constable thought to flatter him and said, "Sir, it was really great! With one blow of your baton you opened his skull. This should open everybody's eyes. Now people will behave."

Birbal said with disdain, "This is not a proof of my manliness, this is a testimony of my meanness."

The constable, undeterred, continued in his exercise of flattering him and said, "The man was really a desperado."

"Shut up. Do you know what a desperado is?", said Birbal. "Desperados are those who indulge in dacoity, thefts, and commit murders. Desperados are not those who are willing to shed their lives for the sake of the country. This is our misfortune that instead of helping such people, we are hurting and harming them. What we have done and are doing is not something to be proud of or be happy about. It is something to be ashamed about."

After the ceremonial bathing with *Gangajal*[6] the dead body was taken on the cortege to the burial ground.

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By the time the body was buried it was two hours after the noon. Mitthan Bai went along with the crowd of women for some distance but when she reached the Queen's Park she could move no further. She had no intention to go home. The vision of the blood soaked, weak and wounded dead body of the martyr persisted before her eyes. She felt ashamed. She hated her husband so much that she didn't even want to see him. She couldn't believe that anything other than fear could improve such a selfish man.

She sat on the grass in Queen's Park and wondered what she could do, where she could go. She could go to her parent's house but even there she could not stay for more than a couple of months. Ultimately she would

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6. Water of river Ganges. River Ganges is considered to be the holiest river by Hindus.

have to come back. She didn't want to depend on such a husband. She wanted to get a job, any job, for her independent sustenance. She thought of difficulties. Then, she brushed aside the thought of them. No difficulty could enfeeble her.

Suddenly she thought of the widow of Ibrahim Ali. She had been told that the couple had no children. She imagined that the old lady might be crying alone in her house with no one to console her. She had already asked about her address from other women. She rose up to go to the house of the widow. On the way she was thinking about how to conduct herself after what her husband had done. She was not aware in what words to give consolation and explain what had happened. There could not be any justification for her husband's act of brutality. Thinking so, she reached Ibrahim Ali's house.

The house was in a narrow lane but had a quiet dignity about it. It looked like a blessed house. She crossed the threshold with halting steps and a palpitating heart. She could see the old widow sitting on the cot in the opposite verandah. Here was the woman whose husband had sacrificed his life on the altar of freedom. She saw that there stood a young man wearing white clothes close by and he was talking to the old woman with tearful eyes. Mitthan was shocked at seeing this man. It was Birbal Singh, her husband.

She asked in an angry bewildered tone, "Why have you come here?"

Birbal said, "I came for the same reason as you. It is to seek forgiveness for my sin."

Mitthan's fair face turned red with pride, affection and extreme happiness. It was a divine glow on her face. She felt as if all her miseries and problems were over for eternity. She felt that she had no worry and no problem in this birth or any birth hereafter.

The Magical Formula
(*Mantra*)

Introduction

There is no English word exactly equivalent to *Mantra* in Hindi. In the context of this story, it means the magical formula that can guarantee success. The story talks about the social inequality practiced for centuries in the rigidly stratified Hindu society. Caste system had been a bane of Hinduism. It denied equality to human beings and sanctified social inequalities with mythology and theory of karma.

According to mythology, the *Brahmins* (highest caste) emerged out of *Brahma's*[1] head, the *Kshatriyas* (warrior class) out of his arms, the *Vaishyas* (merchant class) out of his belly and the *Shudras* (the lowest caste) out of his feet. These different origins made them perennially different.

The category *Shudras,* also known as *dalits,* had no place of respect and dignity in the Hindu society. They were untouchables and performed menial jobs like scavenging, leatherworking. This was a convenient field for the proselytizing missionaries from Christianity and Islam. The effort of the Hindus from higher castes

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1. One of the trinity of Hindu gods viz. Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh.

towards re-conversion created social tension. This story talks of a situation where a high caste Hindu discovers true religion amongst the lowliest of the low Hindus and thereby finds a magical formula to save Hinduism.

Pandit Liladhar Chaube was a forceful orator. There was magic on his lips and magic in the way he articulated each word. Hearing him talk from the dais was a soul satisfying experience. The audience was literally swayed by his oratory. Actually there was no high philosophical content in his speeches. He used simple ordinary words. He had no scholarly pretensions but the tone, tenor and content of his speeches would touch some inner chord in people's hearts. His speeches had the same effect in spite of repeated utterances. We do not agree but people do say that he knows only one speech by rote, which he keeps on repeating with a little change of style or a little variation in words. He would talk about the supremacy of ancient India and dwell upon the greatness and glory of our ancestors and the audience would listen spell bound. For example he would say–

'Gentlemen, the realization of the extent of our degradation really makes us sad. Tears do swell in our eyes, when we realize from what great heights we have fallen. Sometimes one wonders, are we really the descendents of the same great people? We are the scions of a powerful race. Our ancestors could challenge lions for combat and we run away at the sight of mere mice. This is the limit of our degradation. We don't have to go far in history looking for examples of our greatness. A

great Greek historian has written that in Chandragupta's time the houses were not locked. In spite of this, there were no thefts. There was no prostitution, no sex crimes. There was no need of legal documents. People would exchange lakhs of rupees on the basis of mere hand written notes. The entire criminal justice department had just nothing to do because there was no crime. In that glorious time no one died young. (Clapping). Yes, I was saying no one died young. Nobody had heard of a son predeceasing the father. It was something unheard of. Today there are many parents whose heart bears the scar of the death of young sons. The India of today is not even a shadow of the India of the ancient times. India has lost its spirit, its soul.'

This was Chaubeji's style. He would talk about the decline and the degradation of today and refer to the era of plenty and prosperity in the past. He would thereby awaken the religious pride. He had become an important leader because of his success in enthusing the people. He was considered a pillar of Hindu Sabha. Amongst the veterans of Hindu Sabha there was none equal to him in vigour, skill and tact. One could say that he had devoted his entire life for the advancement of Hindu Sabha. It was generally believed that he did not have much personal wealth. However, he was gifted with courage, patience, mental equity and that made him stand apart. He used these endowments for advancement of objectives of Hindu Sabha. He passionately stood for the cause of *Shuddhi*[2]. His entire thought process centered on the rise and fall of

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2. Shuddhi literally means purification. But it has also come to mean the re-conversion or conversion to Hinduism.

Hinduism. He was convinced that there was only one way to infuse new life in Hinduism and that was by *Shuddhi*. The *Shuddhi* movement was considered the panacea of all the moral, psychological, physical, social, economic and religious ills of Hinduism. He laboured relentlessly for the success of *Shuddhi* movement. He had a great knack of collecting contributions for the success of the movement. He was gifted by God with a skill, which could successfully squeeze oil even out of stone. He could extract money even from most miserly men. For collection of money he would use every trick in the trade. He would not mind even stealing and larceny, if he thought it to be in the interest of the community.

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It was summer time, Leeladhar Chaube was planning to go to some hill station. The idea was to have a comfortable pleasure trip and to use the opportunity for collection of contributions for Hindu Sabha. Whenever he felt like traveling, he would involve some friends and they would jointly go to the desired place as members of a delegation. No one objected even if he spent half of the collections as journey expenditure. In any case Hindu Sabha was a gainer. Hindu Sabha was getting money because of his efforts. This time Panditji had decided to take his entire family with him. His financial position, which was in dumps earlier had improved appreciably after the start of the *Shuddhi* movement.

Those who devoted their lives to the upliftment of the community rarely have the good fortune to relax in a pleasant abode. They are born for strife and struggle. News was received that in Madras Province[3] Tabligi

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3. Madras Presidency in British times

Party was very active. Many villages of Hindus had converted to Islam. The *mullahs*[4] were full of zeal and were successfully proselytizing the Hindus in great numbers. It was apprehended that if Hindu Sabha did not act to stop the deluge, the entire province would become Muslim and there would be no tufted person left.

A special session was called to discuss the challenge. After much deliberation it was decided that Chaubeji be requested to go immediately to Madras to save the souls of the brothers who had turned away from true religion. As already mentioned, Chaubeji had entirely devoted himself to the service of Hinduism. He cancelled the programme of going to the hill station and agreed to go to Madras. The secretary of the Hindu Sabha had requested him with tearful eyes that only he could take Hindus out of the deep crisis. He said to Chaubeji, "God has given you immense capability. There is no one in entire India who is equal to you for undertaking this task. Please have mercy on this miserable position of Hindus in this time of acute crisis." Chaubeji could not decline the request. A committee of volunteers was constituted and it left for Madras under the stewardship of Chaubeji. Hindu Sabha arranged for a sumptuous lunch in the honour of the volunteers. One thousand rupees were gifted by a rich man of the city to Chaubeji. Thousands of people came to see off the volunteers on the railway station.

It is not necessary to give the details of the journey. Suffice it to say that on every big station large number of people came to honour the volunteers. At many places bags of money were given to Chaubeji for

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4. Muslim theologian or preacher

the success of the cause. A large tent was gifted by the Princely State of Ratlam. A motorcar was presented by the state of Baroda so that Chaubeji and his associates did not have to move on foot in Madras. Much money and costly gifts were received. Chaubeji and his associates made their encampment in a large vacant land away from the civil population. The *kesri*[5] flag was flying in the encampment. The volunteers got into their uniforms, the local rich sent provisions for food and other needs. The tents were so well put that the people would think as if some king had come to visit the place and had camped there.

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It was eight in the night. The people from *Sevak Dal*[6] had gathered near a settlement of untouchables. There were a few thousand people present. Most of them were untouchables. Since there was no electricity in the area, the place had been adequately lit using a large number of patromax lamps. The untouchables and others were sitting on the ground. There were separate mats to sit for the untouchables. The high caste Hindus were sitting on the carpets. There was a torrent of words from Pandit Leeladhar, "You are the descendents of the *rishis*[7] of yore who could create a new world. You are descendents of the great people whose wisdom, sense of justice and erudition even today make the people of entire world bow their heads."

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5. Saffron colour, traditionally considered as colour representing Hinduism.
6. Group of volunteers
7. Great sages. Here the reference is to Rishi Vishwamitra who had created another heaven to accommodate Trishanku as Indra Dev would not allow the diseased Trishanku to enter heavens with his gross body.

Suddenly, an old untouchable got up and asked, "Are we, the untouchables also the descendents of those *rishis*?"

Liladhar, "Without any doubt! The blood of those *rishis* is coursing through your veins. Even though the today's cruel, parochial, thoughtless Hindu society looks down upon you, the fact remains that you are not inferior to any other Hindu, howsoever big he may think of himself. You are equal to him."

The old man continued, "Why doesn't Hindu Sabha ever display any concern regarding our miseries."

Liladhar replied, "Emergence of Hindu Sabha is a recent phenomenon. In this little time, its achievements can make anyone proud. The Hindus have woken up after the slumber of centuries and the time is near that no Hindu will consider another Hindu inferior. All Hindus will consider each other as brethren. You would remember that *Shri Ram Chandra*[8] had affectionately embraced *Nishad*, the boatman. He had eaten the berries, which had already been tasted by *Shabri*, who did not belong to high caste.

The old man quipped again, "If you are descendents of those great souls, then why do you believe in the caste stratification."

"It is because there is moral and social degradation. In our ignorance we have dishonoured our noble heritage."

"Now since you have woken up from your slumber will you sit with us and eat?"

"I have no objection."

"Will you agree to have your daughter getting married to my son?"

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8. Here reference is made to Bhagwan Rama.

"That has to take time. The inter-marriages are possible when you change your food habits. You must quit meat eating, drinking liquor and get good education to have full assimilation with rest of the Hindus."

"We know that there are many high caste Hindus who drink day in and day out and cannot swallow a single morsel of their bread without meat. There are many Brahmins who are so illiterate that they cannot recognize a single letter in the alphabet. But we have seen you having food sitting with them. You will have no objection to have matrimonial alliances with them. How can you redeem us when you have yourself fallen in ignorance? Your heart is full of conceit. Please go and spend sometime purifying your own soul. You are not the person who can improve our lot. The stigma of inferiority will indelibly stay with us as long as we are within the folds of Hinduism. Howsoever knowledgeable and scholarly you may be, you will continue to treat us as lowly. Hindus have lost their soul and its place has been taken by conceit. We are going in the shelter of that exalted personage, whose followers are eager to embrace us with open arms. They have not asked us to change our conduct and habits. We may be good or bad but they are inviting us in their fold as we are. You may be high, please continue to be high. We cannot soar in the sky to reach you."

"I am astonished to hear such things from a descendent of great *rishis*. The caste system was prescribed by the *rishis*. How can you and I erase it?"

"Don't defame the *rishis*. Casteism is a hoax and farce created by you. You tell us that we take liquor, but if need be you would not mind licking the shoes of those who drink. You abhor us for eating meat but you rub your noses before the beef eating colonial masters. If

anyone of us becomes a king today, you will bow with folded hands before him. In your religion it is the mighty who is high, the one who is helpless and meek belongs to the low caste. Is this your religion?"

The old untouchable left after saying this. All the other untouchables also left. Only Chaubeji and his associates remained. The reverberations of the old man's words lingered in the air.

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The news of Chaubeji's arrival was disconcerting to the Tabligi Party. They very much wanted to keep him away. Chaubeji's reputation was well known. Tabligis knew that their entire effort would go in vain if Chaubeji decides to camp there. They were against his presence there and accordingly started discussing ways and means so that their entire past effort and future aims were not put to naught. The matter was deliberated in detail and after lot of arguments it was decided that Chaubeji be killed. There were many volunteers for this 'divine deed'. It was felt that anyone who killed this *kafir*[9] would have unhindered entry to heavens where houris[10] would fondly hover around him and angels would consider themselves lucky if they could use the dust of his feet as kohl in their eyes. The Holy Prophet (PBUH[11]) would bless the person undertaking the noble deed and would affectionately embrace him as if he were a fond friend. Two hefty young men took upon themselves the holy task of killing Chaubeji.

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9. Unbeliever, non-Muslim
10. Beautiful, young women, especially one of the virgin companions of the faithful in the Muslim Paradise.
11. Peace Be Upon Him

It was ten in the night and there was absolute calm in the Hindu Sabha camp. Chaubeji was awake and was writing a letter to the secretary of Hindu Sabha, which broadly read as under–"The biggest need at this place is that of money. Send as much as possible. You may send delegation to philanthropists; scrounge the pockets of pot-bellied businessmen. Arrange money even if you have to beg for it. There is no hope of redeeming these unfortunate people without opening schools, hospitals, reading rooms, etc. Otherwise we cannot convince them that Hindu Sabha is dedicated to their welfare. Even if you provide half the amount, which Tabligis are spending, I can assure you that the flag of Hinduism will again start flying proudly once again. Empty words and speeches are meaningless. No one lives by blessings alone."

He looked up after hearing the sudden sound of footsteps. He saw two men standing. Getting suspicious he asked, "Who are you? What have you come for?"

"We are the messengers of death. We have been sent by angel of death to capture your soul," answered one of them.

Chaubeji was a well-built person. In younger days he could have overpowered both of them without much effort. His breakfast consisted of three quarter seers[12] of *rasgullas*[13] and two seers of milk. His lunch included a quarter seer of clarified butter in *daal*[14]. In the evening he would have a beverage made of poppy seed, poppy husk, hemp, one seer milk-cream and half seer crushed almonds as supper. Thereafter he would not have

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12. A seer is about 930 gms of weight.
13. A sweetmeat originated from Bengal.
14. Porridge or soup made from split peas or pulses.

anything for the whole night. With so much food and no exercise his body had become bulky. His lifestyle had become sedentary. He would prefer to use a palanquin to move about, as that would give the comfort and feel of a magic carpet. A palanquin was not always available and in that case he would have to take a *tonga*[15] for moving around. A couple of *tonga* drivers would avoid taking him as a passenger because of his bulk. In the field of religion, his oratory and debating skill could fire anyone but as regards the physical agility is concerned he was comparable to a tortoise on sand.

Panditji looked sideways to the door and realized that it was not possible to run away. This realization infused a little courage in him. Sometimes the excessiveness of fear induces courage in us. A pistol was lying nearby. He moved to pick it up and simultaneously roared, "Get out of ..."

Before Chaubeji could complete the sentence there was cruel blows of *lathis*[16] on him and Panditji fainted. The assailants bent down for a closer look and found that there was no sign of life. They were convinced that Chaubeji was dead. Though the primary aim of the assailants had been achieved, they thought it worthwhile to indulge in a little looting also as there was no one to stop them. They took away whatever they could lay their hands on.

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Next day the old *dalit*[17] happened to pass by that side and he found that there was a death-like silence. Even

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15. Light two-wheeled horse drawn vehicle.
16. Fighting stick
17. Oppressed class

Panditji's tent was missing. He was quite amazed. This was more like a fairy tale in which a grand mansion can vanish with all the inmates in no time. There was no sight of the great person who would spend morning eating *rasgullas* and evening grinding almonds and poppy seeds for *thandai*[18]. He moved closer and found that Pandit Leeladhar was lying motionless and appeared dead. The flies were hovering around his face and head. The blood had congealed around his hair. His clothes were soaked with blood. He understood that Panditji's enemies had killed him and bolted away. At that moment Panditji gave a sigh of pain. This meant that life still lingered. The old man went to the village and brought some people to carry Panditji to their settlement for whatever care they could take of him.

They cleaned and bandaged his wounds. The old man almost continuously sat by the side of Panditji's bed. His entire family kept on serving Panditji. The other people from the village helped as much as they could; they knew that there was no one there whom he could call his own. They thought that this man had come there for the sole purpose of saving us for Hinduism. Panditji had fallen sick earlier also but even his family members had not cared so much for him. The old man's entire family and all others from the village were serving with utmost dedication. The service to the guest was a part of their religious ethics. The selfishness, which is a sign of civilization, had still not extinguished their spirit of selfless service.

In this village there was a person who was reputed to remove the venom after a snakebite. When called he would run minimum ten to twenty miles even in a rainy night if called upon to help someone with a snakebite.

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18. Intoxicating drink made of hemp.

He would not ask for the vehicle fare or any other charge. Helping others was his biggest satisfaction. This spirit pervaded the village. The old *dalit* chief even removed the excreta of Panditji with his own hands and would not even mind if Panditji uttered some harsh words. He would beg milk from others to feed Panditji. If there was any inadequacy in serving Panditji by his family members in his absence, the entire family would be severely scolded by him.

It took about a month for Panditji to regain sufficient strength to move about. Now he realized that it was because of these people that he had a new lease of life. There was a realization that those whom he considered lowliest of the low were spiritually at a higher platform. Panditji in a similar situation would have sent the victim of violence to some hospital and felt proud of this noble deed and compared himself with Dadhichi Rishi[20] and Harish Chandra[21]. These *dalits* had done much more. Panditji was full of blessings for these selfless *dalits* for all they did for him.

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Three months passed. Nobody from Hindu Sabha or his family visited the place. There was a touching editorial in the journal of the Hindu Sabha, mourning Panditji's death and eulogizing his good deeds. A decision was taken to build a memorial for him and subscriptions were pouring in from everywhere. His family members had reconciled after customary crying and wailing.

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19. Great mythological *rishi* who donated his bones for making weapons, which were used by gods to kill the demons.
20. A king of great virtue who sacrificed everything for the sake of righteousness.

Panditji had a new surge of life with the devoted service, plenty of milk and clarified butter. His facial skin showed a fresh pinkish glow. The unpolluted air of the village had more than the resuscitating effect. Now his movements were swift and he was agile. The laziness, which is an outcome of obesity, was not a characteristic of Panditji now. There was new life in him.

Winters had set in and Panditji was planning to return home but destiny willed otherwise. There was an outbreak of plague in the village and three people were taken sick. The old headman was one of them. Since plague was considered as a very contagious, incurable and dangerous disease, even the family members of the sick persons had abandoned them and left the village. It was general feeling at that time that certain diseases were because of the wrath of the gods and that looking after patients inflicted with those diseases amounted to inviting the anger of gods. People thought that if gods had decided to take a man away from this world, no mortal could dare oppose them. Plague was considered one such disease and people would desert their homes and hearths abandoning their sick relatives to the inevitable misery that awaited them. The villagers requested Panditji to leave the village along with them. Panditji did not agree. He decided to stay in the village and do whatever little he could do to take care of the sick. He owed a debt of gratitude to the old headman as he had saved him from the clutches of death. Now in this condition it would have been the height of ingratitude to leave the old chowdhari[21] unattended in such pathetic state. Selfless service by

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21. Headman

the old *dalit* had ennobled Panditji's soul. For three days, Panditji tirelessly served the old headman and then the old chowdhari opened his eyes. He was astonished to see Panditji standing by his side. He addressed Panditji thus, "Panditji did you continue to stay with me? I have got summons from the gods. Why are you putting your life in danger for me? Now I cannot stay on this earth any longer. Please go away, it will be a favour to me."

This request had no effect on Panditji. He did not leave the village. He attended to all the three patients as best as he could. He would apply warmth, with the aid of hot water bottles or heated cotton pads, to the swollen lymph nodes. While abandoning their homes, villagers had not even taken grains and utensils. With them Panditji would cook food appropriate for the sick and feed them with his own hands. Spending the nights however was difficult. There was no human voice in the night and Panditji would imagine dangerous wild animals stalking around. His heart would palpitate with fear but still he would not leave. He was fully resolved to save them or to die with them.

After three days when there was no tangible improvement in the condition of the sick persons, Panditji felt greatly alarmed. The main town was at a distance of twenty miles. There was no rail service. There were no proper roads and no conveyance was available. There was no choice except to walk down to the city. Even that was not an easy solution, as anything could happen to patients during his absence. After much thought he left for the town on the fourth day, three hours before the sunrise and reached there by ten in the morning. He went to the hospital and found that it was not easy to get medicine from the hospital. It was customary amongst the hospital staff to charge

exorbitant rates for medicine from the villagers. They could not have made exception in respect of Panditji. The doctor's assistant told bluntly that the medicine was not ready which meant that the necessary combination of medicines was yet to be made.

Panditji grovelled saying, "Sir, I have come from a long distance. There are many people afflicted with plague and they will die if medicine is not given to them." "Why don't you stop blabbering? I have told you that the medicine is not ready and cannot be prepared so early. After all it takes time," replied the doctor's assistant rashly.

Panditji said obsequiously, "Please help me sir. I am a Brahmin, by helping me you will earn blessings for your children and yourself. God will give long life to your children and let glory be with you and you will prosper for ever."

Those who are actuated by bribe have no noble sentiments. They live and die for money. Panditji's entreaties were met with irritated response. In his entire life Panditji had never requested anyone for anything in such a meek manner. He did not even have a paisa with him. Had he known that the medicine would not be available without money from a government hospital, he would have begged some amount from the villagers when they were leaving the village. Suddenly the doctor came out of his bungalow and Panditji rushed and fell on his feet and said in a very obsequious manner, "Doctor Sir, you are a benefactor of the poor, please help me. I am a poor Brahmin there are three persons down with plague in my house. God would bless you."

This was nothing new for the doctor. The poor people used to come quite often. Their grovelling, their screaming, their touching of feet, their falling and

fainting was nothing new to the doctor. He could not have maintained his lavish lifestyle if he had any nobility of feelings. Whatever be the sternness and lack of compassion in the mind, one has to talk sweetly at least for appearances' sake. He moved his feet away and asked, "Where is the patient?"

Panditji said, "Sir, the patients are in the village, which is twenty miles away. I had no means to bring them."

The doctor reasoned, "The patient is at his home in the village and you are here to get the medicine for him! What a wonderful thing? How can I give medicine without seeing the patient?"

Panditji realized his mistake. In a way doctor was right in saying that he could not diagnose and provide medicine without seeing the patient. But Panditji was helpless. He could not have brought three patients unaided over such a long distance. The villagers could have helped by carrying the patients in palanquins but this help was unlikely as taking care of such patients amounted to inviting the wrath of the gods. They were already feeling inimical to Panditji for his continued help and service to the sick whom the gods had decided to kill. They felt that Panditji by this act had displeased the gods and this might bring further misery to the village. If it were somebody else, they would have killed him. Somehow they had started liking Panditji and had allowed him to stay unharmed.

The doctor's reply had left Panditji almost speechless. Still he managed to say, "Sir, please do something."

"There is no medicine available in the hospital. There is some medicine available in my personal stock but you would have to pay for it."

"How much is the cost of the medicine sir?"

The doctor told him that it would cost ten rupees but the benefit accruing from the use of this medicine would be more than that available from the medicine available in the government hospital. He clarified, "Old unusable medicines are kept here. Poor people come and take the medicine. After consuming the medicine, those who are destined to live, live; those who are destined to die, they die. We cannot do anything. But the medicine that I will give you for ten rupees will be a genuine medicine. At that moment ten rupees appeared to be equivalent to the sum of ten lakh rupees to Panditji. In earlier times ten rupees was nothing for him but now it was different. He could not borrow from anyone. The only choice was to beg money but ten rupees was a large sum and could not be obtained so easily. He kept on pondering for half an hour. He knew there was no choice except to beg and he had never done that. He had collected contributions for the noble causes, to save the nation, country, religion and the downtrodden. By accepting contributions he would be favouring the persons giving money. But now the situation was different. He felt that if he begs like a beggar he may have to hear harsh words and taunts. Somebody would say that, "A fat and healthy person like you should be ashamed of begging. You should earn by the sweat of your brow and not extend hands for charity."

Somebody might offer him money in return of manual work. Nobody would accept that he was a Brahmin[22]. He was not attired in his silken *achkan*[23] and scarf. If his saffron scarf was available he could have gone to a rich businessman and got some money. But

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22. Highest amongst the Hindu castes
23. Overcoat

now everything had been looted and lost. In times of adversity even the common sense fails. If he had decided to stand in an open place and started his discourse in Sanskrit at least ten believers would have gathered. Properly attired and bedecked with flowers he could spell-bind an audience with the magic of his words. But now, who would listen to him dressed in his miserable attire.

By now it was afternoon. There was not much time to think. He had to start the return journey early, otherwise it might be too late and anything could happen to the patients lying unattended in the village. He steeled himself to go and beg irrespective of the harsh words and humiliation that he might encounter.

He went to the market place and stood in front of a shop but could not gather the courage to beg.

The shopkeeper asked him, "What do you want?"

"What is the price of rice?" asked Panditji.

Then he moved to another shop. He was more careful now. Sethji[24] was sitting in his upholstered seat. Panditji recited a couplet from the *Geeta*[25]. His melodious voice, his correct pronunciation accent and intonation pleasantly surprised Sethji. He asked, "Where do you come from?"

Panditji, "I am coming from *Kashi*[26] ."

After this Panditji described to Sethji the ten important aspects of religion. He also explained in detail the philosophy inherent in the Sanskrit couplet recited by him. Sethji was enchanted. "Please bless my house by visiting it today," he requested.

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24. Respectable address to a businessman.
25. Theological scripture from the epic Mahabharata called Bhagwadgeeta.
26. Holy city of Hindus.

Any selfish man could have accepted the request without demur but Panditji was in a hurry to return. He said, "Sethji, I have no time today."

Sethji said, "Panditji, kindly do this favour to me somehow."

Panditji was not willing to oblige even after much cajoling and requesting. Sethji said dispiritedly, "It would have been a good fortune of mine to serve you. Your blessed voice would have quenched the thirst of our souls. I beg that when you come next time please do honour us by a visit."

"I will surely come in view of the immense faith that you have," saying this Panditji left.

His natural inhibitions stood in the way of his asking for the alms. He thought that the respect he had earned was simply because of his selfish motives were not apparent. He was in a dilemma. He desperately needed the money. He very much wanted to make the request for money but also he knew that if he made a request that would be at the cost of self-respect. Still undecided he left the shop and stood by the roadside thinking, "Where do I go now? The wintry day is almost over and if I don't beg from anyone, nobody would give me money. Who knows what is happening in my mind? The days are gone when the rich people worshipped Brahmins. Now I have to abandon hopes that someone will give me money without asking for it." Thinking so Panditji moved a few steps further.

"Panditji please stop," he suddenly heard the Sethji's voice from behind..Panditji halted. He thought that this man would again request him for visiting his home. Panditji would have preferred to have just one rupee from him instead of a sumptuous meal at his house. Sethji came and respectfully placed a gold sovereign at

his feet. He was so much overwhelmed with gratitude that there were tears in his eyes. He had not expected this. He now understood that the earth owes its stability to pious people like Sethji. If somebody had asked him to donate a pint or two of his blood for Sethji, he would have gladly done so. He said in a pleasant tone, "This was not required, Sethji. I am not a beggar."

Sethji entreated, "I am your servant. Please accept it, this is not a donation, it is a gift. I do recognize the worthy men when I meet them. There are plenty of mendicants, hermits and others who claim to be serving the community and the religion. But I never feel the surge of faith and respect in my heart while meeting them. One just feels like getting away from them. Seeing your diffidence and hesitation, I could understand that you are a real noble soul and a true scholar who is in difficult times. Please accept this small gift and bless me."

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Panditji purchased the medicines and began the long trek to the village. There was joy, happiness and a sense of victory in his heart. When Lord Hanuman[27] had obtained the *Sanjivani*[28] herb to save Lakshman, he would not have been as happy as Panditji was now. The noble thoughts, the divine happiness, which surged and pulsated in him, would not have been felt even by Hanuman in his supreme moment of glory.

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27. The monkey god.
28. Struck by a javelin from Meghnad, Lakshman, Bhagwan Rama's brother, had fainted. Sushena, the wise medicine man had said only Sanjeevani herb could save him and it was difficult to get. Ultimately Hanuman, the supreme devotee of Bhagwan Rama, brought it from Gandhamadan mountain and Lakshmana was saved.

There was still some light. The Sun was moving continuously in its westwards journey. Panditji felt that even the Sun god was in a hurry as if it had also to give sustenance to some planet. The crimson orb of the Sun lowered behind the mountains. Panditji moved faster as if in competition with Sun.

The darkness was engulfing everything. A couple of stars appeared in the sky. Still there were ten miles to go. Pandit Leeladhar started running. He was not afraid of being alone; he was afraid that he might mistakenly take a wrong direction. On both sides of the road there were human settlements where people were sitting around lighted embers taking in the heat radiation to ward off the cold of the winter.

Suddenly a dog appeared and started moving by the side of Panditji. Panditji recognized the dog; it was Moti, the dog of the old headman. Panditji wandered how the dog knew that Panditji was coming with the medicine and needs help so that he does not forget the route. Panditji called him, "Moti." Hearing this, the dog wagged his tail but did not stop. Even the dog was apparently in no mood to waste time. Panditji knew that God himself has sent Moti for his safe return. Panditji reached the village by ten in the night.

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The disease had not acquired the fatal intensity yet. It was in Panditji's stars to get the credit. It took about a week for all the three patients to be cured. Panditji's reputation traveled far and wide. He had fought an intense battle with Lord Yama, the God of death and saved these people. He had achieved the impossible and come out successful in combat with gods. He was divinity incarnate. People came across long distances

just to look at his noble visage. Panditji was not as much pleased by the praise from other people as he was happy by the fact that his three patients were comfortably moving around.

Chaudhary said, "*Maharaj*[29], you are an incarnation of divinity for us. If you were not here, we would not have been alive."

"It is all *Ishwar's*[30] blessings. I did not do anything," replied Panditji.

"We will never allow you to leave this place. Please bring your children also here," insisted Chaudhary.

"I am thinking on the same lines. I am never going to leave you now. I belong here," said Panditji.

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The mullahs had been very active in the villages at that time. Many villages of Hindus have been proselytized. The Hindu Sabha had been stunned into silence. Nobody dared to come this side. People were firing verbal ammunition from distance against proselytizing mullahs. The Hindu Sabha members and sympathizers wanted to have the assailants of Panditji punished. They were under the impression that Panditji had been killed. Hindu Sabha's numerous representations to the government met with the stereotype replies that killers were not traceable. Money was being collected by Panditji's admirers for a memorial to Panditji.

But the gleam of the mullah's inducements and exhortations had now been dimmed by the luster sparkle of Panditji's sacrifice. People said that in this locality a new god had taken incarnation who could

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29. A respectable address used for high royalty and great sages.
30. God's

revive the dead and could even sacrifice his own life for the sake of his followers. *Mullahs* didn't have the charisma, that magical power, the genuine empathy comparable to this.

This live example was more real than the hollow promises of the fraternity now and the heavens hereafter. Panditji was now a different man. He was not now conceited about his high caste. He now had genuine respect and affection for low caste persons and tribals. Now Panditji hugged them with affection. He now knew that it was because of the darkness in their own houses that they had turned to the lamp of Islam. But when there is the full glow of sunlight in one's own house, why should one go elsewhere in the search of a lamp? It was victory for the *Sanatan Dharma*[31], the eternal faith of Hindus. New temples were built in the village and one could hear the enchanting sound of temple bells and the blowing of the conch shells in the morning and evening. There were positive change in the manner and conduct of the people. Panditji did not do the *Shuddhi* ritual for the purification of anyone's soul. He felt a sense of shame in uttering the word *Shuddhi*. He thought that it was for him to purify his own soul and rid it of conceit. The other people, the shudras, the tribals and the low castes were so pure and unsullied that it would be insulting to them to be subjected to the empty ritual of *Shuddhi*.

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31. Hinduism is called *Sanatan Dharma* by the followers because its roots are so deep in antiquity that no human sage or prophet can be said to have started it. When contrasted with reformist movements like Arya Samaj, it means the large group of Hindus who believe in idol worship.

This was the magical formula that he had learnt from the low caste people he had come to save. And with the help of this magical formula he was able to save Hinduism.

Panditji is still alive and lives with his family in the same area. The people in that area comprise his extended family.

The Salt Inspector
(*Namak ka Daroga*)

Introduction

Salt is a gift of God. It adds taste to our food. The Romans gave salt as a part of the salary to soldiers. Hence the word *salarium*. The British colonial masters ever ready to exploit India and its resources imposed restrictions on manufacture and trade of salt. Gandhiji's defiance of the salt law made history and shook the empire. But here Premchand is concerned with interplay of different set of feelings and emotions. There is an Indian inspector of the British government who wants to be true to his employer that is the British Government, as one who had eaten their salt (received salary from them). Being not true to the salt (*namak haram*) is the biggest abuse even today. His religion had taught him to be true to the master and he decided to be so in spite of offers of bribes in princely sums.

While a corrupt political and judicial system disgraced and dismissed him, it is an irony of sorts that the rich man who tried to corrupt him found his incorruptibility a virtue.

The government had constituted a new department for regulating the trade and manufacture of salt. There were restrictions on transaction of this gift of God and naturally people started its illicit trade. Many stratagems were devised. Somebody would pay bribe to get his job done and somebody else would use a little cunningness. It was a swell-time for the government officials. People were even willing to leave the universally respected and acclaimed job of *Patwari*[1] to find a job in this department. Even the qualified lawyers were craving for the post of inspector in the salt department. The incident belongs to the period when English education was equated with Christianity. Indians in general preferred to learn Persian as a mark of scholarly attainment. Knowledge of Persian love stories and romantic verses was helpful to land up in the highest post.

Munshi Bansidhar was convinced that the tragedy of Zulekha[2] and romance of Majnu & Farhat[3] were more important than the discovery of America by Columbus and the building of bridge across the Palk

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1. Revenue collector
2. Usuf and Zulekha
3. Legendry love stories of Laila-Majnu and Shiri-Farhat

Strait[4] by Nal and Neel as assistants to Lord Rama. He was in search of a job. His father was an experienced person who explained to him, "You can see the bad condition of the house. We are overburdened with debt. My daughters are growing-up fast and we have to find suitable matches for them to marry. I am like an old tree on the precipice. I can fall any time. You are the *defacto* head of the family. While looking for jobs, don't bother about rank and status. The government service is like a *mazar*[5] . What is important are the offerings which are made on the *mazar*. You should work for a job where there are offerings and earning besides the monthly salaries. The monthly salary is like the full moon, which wanes daily and then vanishes. The unofficial offerings are a perennial source eminently suitable for quenching the thirst. The salary is given by man and there is no prosperity in it. The unofficial offering[6] is a gift of almighty and there is a lot of blessing in it. You are yourself a scholarly person. You would understand it better. There is a need of intelligent discernment in such matters. When you meet a man, find out what he means and see what the opportune decision under the circumstances is. After that do whatever is appropriate. A man who needs something from you can be dealt with in a stern and harsh manner. You cannot take an unselfish man for granted. Please remember my words. This is my lifetime accrual of wisdom."

After these words of wisdom Bansidhar's father blessed him. Bansidhar was an obedient son; he had heard every word attentively. He set out in search of a job. In this large world patience was his only friend,

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4. The strait between India and Sri Lanka
5. Grave of a Muslim holy person
6. Bribe

intelligence his only assistant. He had left his house at an auspicious moment and landed up the job of a salt inspector very soon. The salary was good. The potential of unearned income was quite large. When the news reached Bansidhar's father; he was overwhelmed with joy. With the news the creditors became a little polite. The brewers in the village were happy with the prospects of some likely sales. Neighbours were naturally jealous.

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It was a winter night. The lower functionaries of the salt department had taken liquor that night. Munshi Bansidhar had been on the job for six months and had already impressed his seniors with his excellent conduct and performance. His seniors trusted him. The salt office was at a distance of one mile to the west of the river Yamuna. There was a boat bridge on the river. Inspector Munshi Bansidhar was having a pleasant nap that night and suddenly woke up with the sound of moving vehicles and the noise made by boatmen. He got up and wondered where the vehicles went so late in the night. He thought that there had to be something suspicious about it. He got up, put on his uniform, kept his pistol in his pocket, mounted his steed and reached the boat bridge. There was a large cavalcade of vehicles crossing the bridge. He asked the staff on duty in a stern tone, "Whose vehicles are these?"

At first there was stunned silence followed by whispering amongst them. Finally, one person answered, "These vehicles belong to Pandit Alopidin."

Bansidhar asked, "Who is this Pandit Alopidin?"

The reply came, "Pandit Alopidin from Dataganj."

Munshi Bansidhar was astounded. Pandit Alopidin

was the most respected landowner of the region. He used to do business transactions amounting to several lakhs. Many people, both rich and poor, were indebted to him. The extent of his business was very large both in territorial and financial terms. He had sufficient clout in administration also. The British officers would come to his area for hunting expeditions and be his guests. There were religious discourses and continuous feeding of the poor all year around.

Munshiji asked, "Where are the vehicles going?" He was told that those were going to Kanpur. His next question about what the vehicles contained met with a stony silence. Munshi Bansidhar's suspicion became stronger. He asked sternly, "Have you all gone dumb? I am asking what is loaded in this vehicle"

There was no response to this question also. He moved his steed closer to the vehicle and felt the contents of the sack. There was no doubt now. The vehicle was loaded with salt.

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Pandit Alopidin was traveling in his Victoria[7] and was in a state of semi slumber. His vehicle was stopped by the panicky drivers of salt carrying vehicles who informed him, "Sir, the inspector has stopped all vehicles at the boat bridge. He is standing there and has asked you to report there."

Pandit Alopidin had undiluted faith in Lakshmi[8]. He used to say that Lakshmi rules in this world as well as in the high heavens. Law, justice and policy are mere toys rather puppets, in the hands of goddess Lakshmi.

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7. Personal carriage vehicle driven by horses.
8. The goddess of wealth.

He said with great confidence, "You can proceed, I am coming shortly." Panditji was neither ashamed not worried. He kept on chewing betel leaves with casual disdain and thereafter went to meet the inspector. Addressing him he said, "My greetings and blessings to you. What is my fault that my vehicles have been stopped? We Brahmins do deserve kindness and favour from you".

Bansidhar said in a dry tone, "It is the government's orders."

Pandit Alopidin laughed and said, "I do not know of any government order. As far as I am concerned, you are the government. Our relations are more like family affairs. I cannot say nor do any thing beyond your command or desire. You have bothered yourself unnecessarily. It is unthinkable for me to cross these paths without making offerings to the 'god' of this area. I was even otherwise coming to present myself before you." Bansidhar was not tempted. There was great honesty in his character, he said in a loud tone, "I eat the salt of the government and I can not be disloyal to the government. I am not one of those who sell their soul for petty considerations. You are now being taken in custody and will be charged, according to law. I have no time for needless talk." He directed Jamadar Badlusingh to take Alopidin into custody.

Pandit Alopidin was stunned. There was a commotion amongst the cart drivers. Panditji had never heard such hard words earlier. Badlusingh moved ahead to take Alopidin in custody but could not gather the courage to even touch him. Panditji had never seen anybody disrespecting wealth for principles. He thought that Bansidhar is a new official and being young is disrespectful. Maybe, he is immature and therefore hesitant in accepting the money. He thought it would

take time for him to become worldly wise. Turning to Bansidhar in a very meek manner, he said, "Please don't do it, my entire standing will turn to dust. You don't get anything by humiliating me. I will be ruined. Our interests need not be different." Bansidhar was adamant and refused to hear anything.

Alopidin had always taken the support of money and had always considered money to be a rock like support. Now, the support was giving way under his feet. Still his faith was not shaken. He told his head assistant, "Present one thousand rupees to inspector Sahib. He is like a hungry lion."

This angered Bansidhar further. He retorted, "One thousand! Even one lakh cannot deviate me from the path of ethics."

Alopidin was really acrimonious at this unwise firmness in the name of ethics and the conduct, which even the gods would find difficult to adopt. There was a competition between temptation and ethical conduct. Offer went from one thousand to five thousand to ten thousand and finally to twenty thousand but Bansidhar was not tempted and stood like an immovable mountain before a marauding army.

Alopidin said in a dejected manner, "I cannot say anything further. Everything is in your power."

Bansidhar again directed Badlusingh to take Alopidin in custody, who moved further. Alopidin was uttering curses to Bansidhar in his heart. Alopidin moved backward a couple of steps and said with utmost humility, "Sir, for God's sake, please have mercy on me. I am willing to settle for twenty five thousand."

"It is impossible."

"Thirty thousand."

"It is not possible under any circumstances."

"Not even for forty thousand?"

"Even forty lakhs cannot tempt me."

Then Bansidhar directed Badlusingh, "I am not interested in hearing anything further. Take this man in custody immediately."

Ethics had crushed the power of money under its feet. Alopidin saw a well-built man moving towards him with handcuffs in hand. There was no hope now. His eyes showed the extent of the feeling of wretchedness and helplessness that he had. He fainted.

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Even when the world seemed to sleep the rumours ran abound. By morning everybody was talking about this incident. Everybody had a comment to make about Panditji's conduct. Everybody had an unkind word for Panditji. The milkman who habitually added water to the milk, the government officials who signed bogus master rolls, the ticketless travelers and the corrupt businessmen were all discussing the affair as if they were themselves men of virtue. Next day when a handcuffed Panditji, with anger and shame in his heart and bowed head was presented before the court there was commotion in the city. People were very eager to have a view of Panditji in handcuffs. They were sitting on the walls and the rooftops. It was more like a public festival.

The situation changed in court. Pandit Alopidin was like a lion in this judicial jungle. The court officials, the lawyers, the ministers and the orderly all acted as if they were servile to him. Everybody rushed towards him. They were wondering not for Alopidin having done an illegal act. They were really surprised that how could he be shackled by law. How could a man with wealth and the power of gab, come to such a predicament. Everybody was sympathetic towards him. An army of

eminent lawyers gathered to stop the onslaught on Alopidin's reputation. In the battlefield of law there was a fight between ethics and money. Bansidhar stood silent. He had no power except that of truth. He had no weapon except frank expression. There were witnesses but they could be tempted.

Munshiji felt a little uncomfortable towards the turn of events. This was supposed to be the court of justice. But all the officials were intoxicated with bias. Justice and bias don't go together. Where there is bias, justice is unimaginable. The case was heard and decided quickly. Deputy Magistrate said in his decision, "All evidence against Pandit Alopidin is baseless and misleading. He is a very respectable man. It is unimaginable that for a little benefit he would have done this act of indiscretion. Although the salt inspector Munshi Bansidhar is not to be much blamed but one has to say that because of his arrogance and thoughtlessness a gentleman had to face calumny. We are quite happy about the alertness and devotion of Munshi Bansidhar in general. But in this particular case his excessive devotion and excessive zeal clouded his discretion and good sense. He should be careful in future."

The lawyers were, very happy. Pandit Alopidin's relatives distributed alms and favours. It was philanthropy at its maximum. The lavish flow of money even affected the foundations of the court. When Bansidhar left court there were castigating remarks. The peons of the court bowed with mock respect. Every taunt, every sly gesture was really acting as a fuel to his flaming pride. Today's experience was sad and surprising to Munshi Bansidhar. The degrees of law and scholarship, the gray flowing beards and the large

gowns worn by judicial officials were no more an object of veneration to him. His manner of walk was erect as of a man who knows that he is one of the few with upright conduct.

Bansidhar had taken enmity with the power of money and he had to pay the price. He got the order of dismissal within a week. He had got the punishment for devotion to duty. He went back to his house with a broken heart, full of anguish. The old father was already angry with him for not hearing his apt word of wisdom. He was sore that there was no money to pay to the creditors for the meat and liquor purchased and his son intended to run the home merely on the salary. The old man had also been in government service. He did not occupy a high post however he worked with boldness and not with honesty and here the son wanted to conduct himself rigidly with utmost honesty. He thought of it as an act of lighting a lamp in the mosque when the house itself is filled with darkness. He was sore for this lack of common sense on the part of his son. He thought that the son's entire education had been a waste. When Bansidhar reached home after dismissal, Bansidhar's father was already in this mood of dejection and disappointment. The old man was really shaken. He banged his hands on his head and told his son, "I feel like breaking your head and mine." He said many hard words and if Bansidhar had not gone out of the house, things would have become more serious. Bansidhar's old mother was feeling bad too, that he spoiled her plans of going to Jaganath Dham and Rameswaram for pilgrimage. Bansidhar's wife refused to even talk with him.

One week passed somehow. It was evening time. The old man was renting lord Rama's holy name. At that time, a highly decorated chariot stopped in front

of the house. There were rose and green coloured curtains enclosing the sitting space. The chariot was being drawn by two majestic oxen. Their horns gilded with bright brass and blue silken thread decorated their backs. There were many servants with *lathis*[9] on their shoulders in accompaniment. The old man got up to welcome the chariot. He saw that Pandit Alopidin was the distinguished visitor. He bowed fawningly and started flattering in a very servile manner. He said, "It is the dawn of good fortune for us that your lovely feet have graced this door of ours. You are our revered guest and we are shamefaced of the dark deeds done by my son. It is better to be childless than have such a disgraceful son.

Alopidin said, "Dear brother, don't speak like that."

Munshiji asked in a surprised manner, "What else should I say about such a son?"

Alopidin said in an affectionate tone, "In this vast world, how many truly religious persons are there who can sacrifice everything in the name of ethics and principles?"

Pandit Alopidin then addressed Bansidhar, "Don't consider that I am flattering you. I didn't have to take so much botheration in coming here for merely flattering you. That eventful night you took me in custody by the power of your official authority. Today I have come to you, in your custody, by my own will and volition. I have met thousands of such people, interacted with thousands of senior officers, but only you have been able to defeat me. I could make everybody a slave of my money and me. Please permit me to make a request."

Bansidhar had welcomed Alopidin with essential courtesies but had retained his sense of self-pride. He

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9. Sticks

understood that this man has come to humiliate him. He did not try to say even a word, which could be construed as if he was asking for forgiveness. His father's servile conduct was quite uncomfortable to him. After hearing Panditji his resentment gave way. He looked towards Pandit Alopidin, there were noble feelings clearly apparent on the face.

Now the pride in the manner of Bansidhar gave place to courtesy. He said with modesty, "This is your large heartedness that you say so. Please excuse me for the discourtesy. I was bound by my commitment to ethical conduct. Otherwise I am your servant. I would accept any order of yours."

Alopidin said in a humble manner, "At the river bank you had not accepted my prayer but today please don't say no to me."

"I assure I would do whatever I am capable of" Bansidhar replied.

Alopidin took out a typed paper from his pocket and said to Bansidhar, "This is an offer for a post. Please affix your signature indicating your acceptance. I am a Brahmin, unless you agree I am not going to leave your door."

Munshi Bansidhar read the document and had tears of gratitude in his eyes. Pandit Alopidin had appointed him as the manager of all his estates on a permanent basis. There was a salary of six thousand rupees per annum in addition to reimbursement of all expenditure. There was also the provision of a large house with servants and a horse.

In a trembling voice he said, "Panditji I am not capable of saying in words what I feel about your magnanimity but I do confess that I am not suitable for this high post."

Alopidin said jokingly, "I am looking for an unsuitable man for the present."

Bansidhar said serenely, "I am like your servant. It will be a great honour to work for a large hearted noble man like you. I don't have the education, the wisdom and the sophistication to measure up to your expectation. You need a really experienced and discerning man."

Alopidin gave his pen to Bansidhar and said, "I am not in the need of scholarship nor experience, nor discernment, nor skill. I know all about these qualities. Now, destiny and good fortune have shown me a gem of a man before whose brilliance all scholarship and capability looks dim. Please take this pen and sign it without much thinking. I pray to God that you should continue to be the same impolite, harsh, arrogant but ethically correct man as I encountered on the river bank that day."

Bansidhar's eyes swelled with tears. In the narrow confines of his heart so much of gratitude could not confine itself and had to find its way out through his eyes. He looked at Panditji with a feeling of respect and deference and signed the acceptance with his shaking hand.

Pandit Alopidin embraced him overwhelmed with happiness.

The Scimitar of Vikramaditya
(*Vikramaditya Ka Tega*)

Introduction

King Vikramaditya is as famous in the folk tales of India as King Arthur is in the legends of England. King Arthur was probably not a historical figure but the legend has it that he repulsed the attacks of Angles and Saxons. However, Vikramaditya was a historical figure who fought against *Sakas,* a foreign tribe. The *Vikrama Samwat* still prevalent in India owes its name to him.

Grandparents have for centuries narrated the stories of Vikramaditya and his greatness to their curious and eager grandchildren. Vikramaditya was known not only for his bravery but also for his justice, fairplay and righteousness, which is the corpus of dharma.

The story relates to the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The place of occurrence is near Peshawar, a principal frontier city now in Pakistan. Maharaja Ranjit Singh is another historical and legendary figure of India. He conquered and united twelve Sikh principalities (*misls*) into a strong kingdom, which stood up to the British might as long as he lived. Like Vikramaditya he would travel incognito to know about the inconveniences suffered by his subjects. No better barrack system has ever been devised by any other king or ruler. Even *Bhagwan* Rama practised this, otherwise he would not have heard the irresponsible talk of a washerwoman.

This story has a message for the rulers of today and for all times. A ruler exists only for his people and for dispensing justice to them. A ruler is responsible for the wrong acts of his subordinates and he must always be willing to own a mistake otherwise he falls in the eyes of God, his countrymen and history.

There is a small town called Mahnagar near Peshawar. On a dark moonless night, a strange flickering light was seen on the ground under the large canopy of a huge tree. The darkness of the night and the eerie silence made the sight more spectacular. It was a small village and soon everyone came to know. The women who were kneading the dough in their houses could not restrain themselves and came rushing to see the strange sight without even caring to wash their hands. The old grandfathers picked up the tiny tots on their shoulders and reached there with faltering steps, coughing now and then because of age and excitement. The newly wed girls because of customary modesty could not come out and join others but were peeping out of the crevices of the doors to get a glimpse of what was happening outside. The darkness of the moonless night under the canopy of the dome like tree was lightened by the luminescence that emanated from the earth. One could draw analogy to the halo of a liberated soul surrounded by the shadow of the sinners.

Tek Singh, an old man said what he thought were the words of profound wisdom, "I have understood, it is a congregation of the spirits."

Pandit Chetram was equally confident in his own assertion, "How can you be so sure about that I have

understood the entire thing? The glow comes from a *Nagmani*[1] The snake has left his sparkling stone here and has gone for his nocturnal hunt. Any body with a doubt can go around and have a look".

Munshi Gulab Chand said, "It is rare to find a *Nagmani*. Anyone who has it, is bound to become a king. But picking it is risky, as the snake will take revenge. They do not forget and neither do they forgive."

Prem Singh was an old ex-soldier belonging to the Jat community and he was intently listening to these talks among the men.

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Prem Singh was all alone in the world. He had spent his youth in fighting battles. Towards the evening of his life he returned to his childhood home. His house was in a dilapidated condition and lacked the human warmth, as there was no one besides him in the house. He longed for human company. He very much wanted to hold and fondle a child. The desire to have children is universal. Even the birds return to their nests in the evening bringing morsels of food for their small off-springs. The same overpowering desire which gives stimulus and speed to the limbs of the cattle returning home when the sun starts setting. That same all-consuming longing developed in Prem Singh's heart.

He longed for a grandchild to embrace him with garland of small arms around his neck. There was just no one in whose little mouth he could put little morsels of food with love and fondness. There was just no one

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1. It is a common belief that a snake when it is one hundred years old acquires a precious jewel which shines on top of its hood. It is called *Nagmani*.

waiting to hear lullabies from him. Moving from one battlefield to another he had never felt those cravings earlier. But now, in his old age, solitude hung heavy on his soul.

One day, Prem Singh had gone to the town market for purchasing odds and ends. On his way he observed a house on fire. The flames of the raging fire were rising high in the sky like the fluttering flags. A lone woman was crying desolately by the side of the house. She was the owner of the house and was a young widow. Her young son was inside the house when it caught fire. She had rushed to get villagers to help douse the fire but in the meantime, the fire had so much intensified that her chance of ever meeting her little child had dimmed. Her painful cries stuck a sympathetic chord in Prem Singh's heart and he recklessly entered the house unmindful of the searing flames around. In no time he was out carrying the little child in his arms. The widowed woman took the child and kissed his soft cheeks in a frenzy of maternal affection. There were silent tears in her eyes and endless gratitude on her lips when she said, "Sir, I don't know you but I am gifting this fond son of mine to you to tend and care for. You may have other children while caring for them please look after this innocent orphan also. I can discern a lot of compassion in your heart. Everything that was mine has now turned to ashes, only the clothes I am wearing remain. I will subsist by doing menial task here and there. But for my child's sake, I beseech you to look after him as your own son.

Tears swelled in Prem Singh's eyes. He said, "From this day you treat me as your father and live with me in my house. The little that God has given me is enough for the three of us. I am all-alone in the world, I have nobody even to do my last rites at my death. There may

be a divine purpose of God having brought us together".

In the evening, Prem Singh returned to his house with the warmth of a sweet smiling child on his shoulder followed in unsteady steps by a pale and sad woman. Today, it was not a house it was a home. He no longer needed to go every evening to the riverside to stare at the ripples below and at the patterns of passing clouds above.

Prem Singh wanted this child to be a king one day. So, he left the house at midnight to get the *Nagmani* for his child. He had taken his sword with him and moved to the banyan tree in small halting steps. When he reached closer to the tree, he found the glow to be more intense. The snake was not around. Prem Singh was very happy. He thought the snake might still be hunting around.

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He moved his hand to grab the *Nagmani* but found nothing besides the hard ground. His old heart missed a beat and the hair on his body stood on its end. Suddenly, he noticed something hanging from the tree. Instinctively he took out his sword from its sheath. His reaction was unnecessary as the offending sight was nothing but a hanging root of the banyan tree, Now Prem Singh was not afraid. He had nothing to scrape and dig the ground with so he used the end of his sword for the purpose. When he had dug for about six to eight inches his sword struck something hard. The steady glow, which existed earlier, was intensified. His sword had stuck a small scimitar. He took it out. In his hands the glow of the scimitar ceased. It was a small but splendid scimitar. Priceless jewels were embedded on the handle. The handle also bore the inscription,

"Vikramaditya". The scimitar belonged to Vikramaditya, the legendry king of India.

If the scimitar could speak, it would tell interesting anecdotes from the life of Kalidas, the immortal poet who was a companion of Vikramaditya and his poet laureate. The scimitar would also tell the stories about the incognito travels made by Vikramaditya in the darkness of the nights so as to know about the sufferings of his citizens and the injustice perpetrated on the poor people. Vikramaditya wanted to hear with his own ears and observe with his own perceptive eyes the condition of those he ruled. His compassion and sense of justice are still echoed in the length and breadth, of India. This scimitar was witness to all his acts of greatness, compassion, magnanimity, justice and charity. This scimitar had been by the side of Vikramaditya on his legendry throne, the throne which was so glorious that even king Bhoj[2] could not sit on it.

There was an incomparable glow in the scimitar. It had been buried for centuries under the ground and still there was no loss of lustre. It could illumine a dark house with no lamps around. Like the stars in the skies it could glow with undiminished light through out the night. Its luminescence could be seen even when it was covered by a cloth, dimmed but not extinguished, reminiscent of the moon behind a veil of clouds. The glow which could keep through the warp and weft of the cloth would be totally lost if somebody just even touched it. Every body was surprised at it but nobody understood it.

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2. Another legendry king.

Punjab at that time, had a place of prominence in the contemporary history of India. Its king, Maharaja Ranjit Singh was known for his bravery, magnanimity, sense of justice and charity. He was considered as the Vikramaditya of his times. He had brought the mighty Kabul to its knees. For a thousand years, armed conquerors from Kabul had come to the hills and plains of India and subdued its populace. Ranjit Singh had altered those equations. After conquering Kabul, Ranjit Singh was journeying back to Lahore and got so enchanted by the verdant plains that he decided to make a temporary encampments there. With the king's army around, the sellers of wares gathered there and in no time there was a roaring make-shift market. There was dark smoke from twenty-five thousand fireplaces. The entire area was enveloped with darkness except for the flame from the hearths and the torches lighted by the soldiers.

The victorious army had reason to celebrate. There was enthusiastic music in the encampment. As is customary after the war, many Afghan women had been captured by the commanders of the wining army. These women were sitting under the shade of the tree on the floor and were made to sing which they did in their unmelodious tones. The soldiers had congregated around and those who did not understand or appreciate music were busy cracking jokes to their hearts content. There was spontaneous display of fun, frolic and mimicry. Some soldiers were moving around with flaming torches in hand and hundreds of on lookers in tow. Everyone was intoxicated by the recently won victory.

It was about nine in the night. A man emerged from the royal tent concealing his personage with a black

blanket around his shoulders and head and carrying a bamboo staff in his hand. Today, there was an air of happiness, in Mahnagar. The entire town was adorned with special lighting. Everybody had cleaned their house and the area around. The soulful sound from *shehnai*[3] was in the air. The solitary traveler soon reached the town meeting place. The place had been decorated and illumined tastefully. The elders of the village were busy discussing what should be gifted to His Majesty. His Majesty had enhanced the honour of the place by visiting it. This was a rare occasion and everyone thought that something appropriate to the honour of His Majesty should be presented. Everyone was worried as no one could think about something suitable. The greatness and the grandeur of Maharaja Ranjit Singh merited a gift like boatloads of precious jewels but where were they to be found. Suddenly Prem Singh stood up and said, "If you gentlemen approve, I am willing to give the scimitar of Vikramaditya to be gifted to Maharaja Ranjit Singh."

This sent a tremor of applause and happiness amongst the audience. Suddenly the man with the black blanket entered the assembly and raised his hands saying "Victory belongs to *Wahe Guru*[4]".

Chetram asked, "Who are you?"

"I am an ordinary traveler on way to Peshawar. It has got quite late in the night and if you permit I would like to lie down and sleep here till sunrise," responded the visitor.

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3. A musical instrument akin to a clarinet made immortal by Ustad Bismillah Khan in the twentieth century.
4. *Wahe Guru* refers to Almighty God who is the ultimate teacher.

Tek Singh said, "Yes, you can very well sleep here. I will get you a cot if you need one."

The traveler opined, "Please, don't brother. I will be quite comfortable sleeping on this mat. You were just talking about the scimitar of Vikramaditya. This raised my curiosity and I took the liberty of coming to you. Does any body here have the scimitar of Vikramaditya?"

From the demeanour of the traveler it was clear that he was a noble person. His voice had a magnetic charm about it. All eyes turned towards him. Pandit Chet Ram said, "Yes, someone found the scimitar of Vikramaditya buried under the ground".

The traveler asked, "How are you so sure that it belongs to him?"

Chet Ram replied, "His name is written on the handle."

"It must be a big sword".

"It is a small piece".

"Then there must be something special about it?"

"It has got a priceless quality. There is no explanation of what one sees. It you keep it at a place, it gives off light like a luminous lamp."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, however if somebody holds the scimitar in his hands, then all luminescence is lost."

The visitor now was imbued with a child like curiosity. He was eager to know more about it. He spoke in an enthusiastic tone, "Vikramaditya, glory be with you."

Then he turned towards the crowd and said, "Who is the gentleman having that priceless treasure".

Prem Singh said with justified pride, "I have got it."

"Can I have a look?"

"Yes, I can show it you in the morning. But hold on, we have got to present that scimitar to Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the morning. If you feel like it, you can come with me now and see it."

The traveler accompanied by Prem Singh left the assembly place. Prem Singh took the traveler to his house and to the room where the scimitar lay. There was no lamp in the room but the room was entirely illuminated. The visitor spoke as if he was talking to Vikramaditya, "Centuries have passed but your sword has not lost its lustre," saying this, the visitor touched the scimitar and suddenly there was darkness all round.

The traveler kept the scimitar back on the high wooden platform. His face showed deep dejection. He turned to Prem Singh and said, "Are you gifting this scimitar to Ranjit Singh? He is not great enough to hold it."

Saying this, the traveler left the place abruptly moving with fast steps. Vrinda[5] was standing near the door, the traveler turned a fleeting glance towards her and then left without uttering a word.

It was past midnight but still there was a lot of bustle and revelry all round. In this moment of victory no one wanted to sleep. If some body was seen dozing or yawning his colleagues would make him stand on one leg. Suddenly the message was received that His Majesty had decided to leave immediately. No one knew why a decision to travel in pitch darkness was taken.

There was a lot of commotion in the entire army. His Majesty left with his entourage. The rest of the army

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5. Vrinda is the name of a medicinal herb like basil. It also represents a Hindu Goddess who was married to lord Shiva. She is an object of worship by the Hindus.

was to follow. Every river and lake needs an embankment otherwise the unrestrained water can create havoc. After the king and his senior commanders left, it was an atmosphere of free abandon for everyone as there was no one to restrain them.

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Vrinda had been a widow for three years. Her husband was a carefree person interested in music and fine-arts. He was a true disciple of *Saraswati,* the Goddess of knowledge, music and wisdom. Whatever he had inherited was spent towards cultivating of musical talent and towards helping people well versed in music. His inherited property worth three lakhs[6] did not last even for three years. He was not unhappy for having dissipated his patrimony as the Goddess *Saraswati* had raised him to the pinnacle of musical arts so much so that even professionally established musicians did not outshine him in popular acclaim. His love for music was equaled by his love for Vrinda, his consort. His soul was imbued with music while his heart was permeated to its core with love for Vrinda. He taught music to Vrinda first in frolic and then in real earnest. She was blessed in being able to imbibe the nectar that is music.

She lost her husband three years ago and with that her rose petal like lips had lost their beautiful smile. She, a typical Hindu widow, had bid adieu to all that is pleasant and comforting except music. Whenever the fond memories of the times past and love lost seared

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6. Three lakhs during Ranjit Singh's time was a lot of money as a little money went far. Inflation has always been a way of life and present generation may not have idea about the worth of three lakhs then.

her heart, music was something she could depend upon to lift her low spirits. For her music was not a source of sensual pleasure. She felt it was something that united her with the soul of her departed husband. While singing, she would imagine her lilting voice reaching across time and space to her husband and make him smile. The mental image of her husband's happy visage appreciating her song was the motivation enough for her to sing. Singing for her was an exercise in love and devotion to the fond memory of her dear departed husband.

It was late in the night. The luminescent light of the moon was no longer bright. There was an eerie silence all around. The solitude made her lonely self sing.

"Tell me please the path to my lost love..."

There was longing in her voice and there was beauty in it. There was pain in her words but there was also the balm for that pain. The crimson dawn heralding the new day and the nightingale singing her pleasant songs welcoming the dawn don't have the magic enough to equal the sweetness and the emotional munificence of Vrinda's song. The song reaches and touches the inner core of those hearts that have not lost their innocence.

The refrain continues:

"Shall someone tell me the path to my lost love?
I do not know
I cannot know
Where I lost my dearest love?"

Suddenly there was a knock at the door and then several voices spoke hoarsely, "Who is inside? Open the door."

Vrinda was stunned into silence. Prem Singh got up and opened the door. There was a crowd of soldiers

outside. The moment the door was opened, some of them crossed the threshold into the house. One intruder said, "There is a singing girl in your house. We want her to sing."

Prem Singh said sternly, "There is no singing girl in the house."

The soldiers did not like the answer. They caught him and held him roughly. One soldier asked, "Why don't you tell who is singing?"

Prem Singh said, "There is no singing girl. My daughter is singing."

One soldier said, "Let it be anybody. We are here to hear her sing."

Prem Singh was seething with anger and indignation. Restraining himself with difficulty he said, "Friends, I am an ex-soldier. I have spent my entire life in battlefields but never did I ..."

No one was bothered as to what Prem Singh felt or was saying. His rest of the words were lost in the din. A young soldier whose eyes were flaming red with alcohol, power and youth howled, "Pull out his moustache."

Vrinda was standing in the inner courtyard, stunned but not oblivious of what was going on. When she saw the soldiers pulling the moustache of old Prem Singh she could not restrain herself and entered the undisciplined assembly of arrogant army men with bold strides. She said in a loud voice, "Who wants to hear me sing?"

Seeing her, the soldiers left Prem Singh and said, "We all want to hear you sing."

Vrinda said, "Okay, you sit down and listen. I will sing."

Some soldiers were not agreeable to this. They insisted that she should be made to accompany them to

their encampment. They felt that it would be a gala time there."

This was not acceptable to Prem Singh. While she was stepping out of the house with the soldiers he said, "If you go out with them, be sure not to set your feet back in this house ever again."

When Vrinda reached their camp she noticed a tempestuous tumult of uncivilized behaviour. The arrogance of power is not content with victory. It is not content with subduing the enemy. During war and particularly after success in war all the latent baser emotions concealed under the veneer of civilization erupt with ferocious intensity and obliterate all that is good, noble and humane. The savage forces of barbarianism are never content merely with the blood of the enemy; they suck and sap all that is good and noble in civilization.

The soldiers took Vrinda to a spacious well-decorated tent. There was enough light there because of large flaming lamps. There was fire in the lamps; there was fire in the *surahis*[7] of alcohol being consumed. Fire consumed darkness, alcohol consumed noble restrain. Vrinda sat on the floor like a terror stricken lamb surrounded by hungry wolves. The demon of lust sleeping in human hearts gets awakened and emboldened when drunk with victory and wine.

She had to bear with the covetous glances and painful barbs of their uncivilized utterances. The sensitive and noble heart of the modest traditional lady was repeatedly being pierced by the lusty looks and lascivious words. In this time of crisis and helplessness

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7. Long necked vessels for keeping water or other drinks.

she thought of *Bhagwan Krishna*[8] who saved the honour of Draupadi when the Pandavas sat motionless bound as they were by unfair customary practices, an unjust social order and defeat. She prayed to *Bhagwan Krishna* in her mind:

"O God, you saved Draupadi's honour though she could have been helped by mighty Pandavas if they had dared to unshackle the bonds of unjust beliefs. I am totally helpless, an orphan in your world. Will you not come to my aid and help me keep my modesty unsullied?" Thinking of the supreme saviour, she sang what Mira, the eternal devotee of God had sung,

"Siya Raghubir bharoso aiso[9]*."*

Vrinda sang this song in an enchanting manner. Her voice was sweet. There was immense and intense feeling in the words. While reciting she was sitting before drunken soldiers but she imagined herself beseeching before the eternal image of *Krishna* playing on flute.

She sang for an hour or so and then she stopped. For sometime there was silence all-round. With her melodious music sung celestially she had kept all the soldiers sit statue-like. Music had stalled the burning

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8. We have not used the customary translation like Lord Krishna or Lord Rama as they are embodiments of God. When ordinary mortals like Profumo and Alfred Douglass can have the title 'Lord', it will be grossly improper and blasphemous to use it for manifestations of God. Moreover we do not say Lord Zeus or Lord Apollo or Lord Mars for Greek gods.
9. This song is in praise of *Bhagwan* Ram, who like *Bhagwan* Krishna was also the incarnation of Vishnu and Sita his consort. The song tells about the power of faith. There is nothing unusual about praying to one incarnation and then to another because they are all manifestations of Almighty.

passion in the soldiers' hearts. Music afterall has the power to calm even an excited elephant. The harsh sound of camp gong struck five times stirred the soldiers from their reverie. The soldiers and chiefs were startled. They had to pack up and march. It was a long journey to be performed and Lahore was far off. Tents were removed from their moorings. The horses were fed and given water. Everyone was in a hurry to finish his assigned task. The marching order was given with the first glimpse of crimson sun on the horizon. A few hours ago it was a bustling army camp, now it was a desolate and deserted place. The broken hearth, the cinder of the extinguished embers, the marks on ground where tent pegs had been driven and then removed were lingering testimonies of the victorious army that had encamped there.

This gave an opportunity to Vrinda to move out unharmed. Still her heart palpitated with fear. She was afraid after having undergone the ordeal, of being apprehended again. After walking some distance, she felt somewhat safe. The weather was pleasant and so was the freedom. The green leaves danced in the cool breeze. The eastern horizon was coloured crimson. She wanted to return to her adopted home but her feet stopped at the memory of what Prem Singh had said before she left the house. He had clearly said that she should not come back after having gone out with the soldiers. She sighed with stifling sadness and then sat down.

She did not know where to go. In God's wide world she had now no place to call her own. She felt like a solitary bird that escaped out of the net of a bird catcher only to find that her wings had been clipped. Freedom has no meaning to such a bird. She can see the verdant

branches of majestic trees with deep longing and yet cannot fly to be close to them. The abject helplessness of such a bird makes it think that the confinement in a cage was preferable to such a freedom. Vrinda felt like such a bird to which freedom of the skies and the green of the woods had become unattainable.

She kept on thinking about her sad predicament for a long time and then got up. She went to Prem Singh's house. The door was open but she could not persuade herself to cross the threshold. She had a fond last look at the house that was her home and left towards the jungle.

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In the posh area of Lahore, there is a well-maintained three-storied house. It is on a main road. Verdant creepers with blooming colourful flowers enhance the beauty of the walls. In this house there is a tastefully decorated room. Sitting on a thick velvety carpet in rhat room, Vrinda is playfully communicating with a beautiful sweet-voiced nightingale. The walls are beautifully painted with light green hue. There are wall hangings and ornately framed paintings fixed on the walls. The air smells of soft sandalwood and *khus*[10] perfume. An old woman is gently moving a large hand-fan to comfort Vrinda. There is luxury but there is no happiness. Vrinda looks sad like a faded flower of *Moulshree*[11].

Vrinda is now known as amongst the foremost singing girls of Lahore. In only three months, that she

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10. The scented root of the grass.
11. The tree with botanical name *Ninsops dengi* with very fragrant small flowers.

has been here, she has acquired great fame for her music. No one knows her by her original name. She is Shyama here which is also the name of a beautiful black singing bird. Lahore is a big city yet every one knows and can tell where she lives. There is magic in her voice and charm in manner of singing. The entire city is enchanted by her. Lahore is famous as a city of culture and refinement. There are a large number of excellent singers who can be compared to cuckoo and nightingale but there is only one Shyama. Her presentation of *Dhrupad*[12] is so good that sometimes people call her *Dhrupad* Shyama.

Lahore boasts of some descendents of Tansen who was the legendry court poet in the court of Akbar the Great. They sing superbly. They know the nuances of Indian music and its styles. They however do not like Shyama's singing. They criticize her for not being true to the accepted norms of classical Indian music. While that may be so, she sings divinely from the core of her heart, with rare feeling. The feelings she expresses are perfunctory. She is not like an automation repeating mechanically the voices and the motions ordained by classical music. She does not copy anyone's style, as she had not formally learnt music. She lived it. When music is from the heart it has a rare unequalled quality to it. Music gatherings without her appeared colourless. She was invited to all-important gatherings. People loved to hear her even when she sang Sanskrit *shlokas*[13] the meaning of which was mostly unintelligible to them. She has made a niche in the musical life of Lahore, which no one else can fill. The commoners are

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12. A strain/style of Indian Music.
13. Couplet

fascinated by her. The shower of flower petals on her palanquin whenever she goes out is a testimony.

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Maharaja Ranjit Singh returned from Kabul three months ago after a momentous victory but there has been no proper formal celebration. His Majesty looked sad. He did not even like to discuss the victory which had brought great glory to his already illustrious name. The cheerfulness that characterized him before his visit to Mahnagar was no longer there. Conquering Kabul was his lifelong dream. It was an overpowering passion nurtured over the years. No Hindu king for a thousand years could even imagine that subjugating Kabul was within the realm of possibility. For a thousand years conquerors had come from Kabul to plunder India. This was a turning point in the history. The rocky mountains of Ghazni and Kabul had turned red with the blood of the adversary but still the victor was not happy. No one knew. Vrinda alone knew.

For three months this was the state of affairs. Then the lugubrious mood was lighted. The courtiers had been impatiently waiting for such a change. One day the courtiers gathered the courage to collectively ask for a celebration of victory–the momentous victory that marked a turning point in Indian History. Initially, the Maharaja's reaction was unfavourable, rather hostile, but later on after much persuasion he agreed.

It had to be a grand celebration. The royal theatre was spruced up. Messages were sent inviting famous singing and dancing girls of Patna, Banaras, Lucknow, Gwalior, Delhi and Puna. Vrinda was also invited. After a long time here was something, which could make her pleased.

The period of celebration drew near. The city was spruced up. The colourful banners and the victory arches made the beautiful city festive. The kings and vassals started coming in their finery with their retinue. The auditorium was so well decorated and so well provided for that it looked as a place for luxury and enjoyment of the opulent and the affluent.

The court formally assembled in the evening in the open. His Majesty sat on a resplendent throne. The princes, the landed nobility, the aristocracy all vied with each other in display of their wealth and loyalty to the Maharaja. One by one they bowed in salutation and kissed the ground before him. The crowd surged everywhere. People's enthusiasm and panoply of colour all around enhanced the celebratory mood. People were wearing colourful dresses for this special occasion and their movement looked as if multitude of flowers were floating on the surface of a river.

Celebrations do result sometimes in a little incivility. Festive mood does sometime lead to frolics. A fat Brahmin with protruding tummy was going along the road. A young man stuck a bat on it. *Panditji*[14] ran shaking his bulging belly to throw off the bat. The onlookers were thrilled at poor *Panditji's* predicament. A *Maulvi*[15] was standing near a shop. The shopkeeper politely requested him to sit on a chair, which was kept outside the shop. *Maulviji* was visibly pleased. He thought, 'My impressive dress and deportment have made him offer the chair to me and not to anyone else amongst the thousands who have passed by. These

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14. Belonging to the caste group which carries out Hindu religious rituals.
15. Muslim man revered for his religious learning or piety.

shopkeepers do have a sixth sense telling them as to who is important.' *Maulviji* gracefully accepted the offer and fell down with a thud and slid on to a side drain while attempting to sit. His fine attire got drenched and muddied. He shouted a million curses on the shopkeeper. All the people standing there or passing by laughed afterall this is bound to happen when you sit on a three-legged chair.

There was an opium addict standing in the crowd. Age and opium had made his spine stoop. His cheeks were hollow. The hair on his head were few and far between and the beard had been dyed red with henna. The attempt to look youthful had been completed by the application of kohl in the eyes. A costermonger offered to sell him sweet, rose tinted *rewris*. He claimed that those were Friday's special offering made with rose petals in addition to sugar and sesame seeds. The price he quoted was also very low even by the standards of those times when things were really cheap. The addict was tempted to buy but a quick search showed only empty pockets. This was really disappointing. "Such a fabulous sweet made of rose petals at such a low price and I do not have the money. Only if I had the money I would have definitely purchased a basketful," the addict mused.

The costermonger appeared excessively generous. He said, "You can take it on credit. Just do not bother about money now. With a respectable man like you, I can always be sure of getting the sale proceeds afterwards." The addict's lips broadened into a smile. He was inwardly very happy. He took hundred grams of the seemingly luscious sweetmeat and thought to himself, "Shame on me, if I pay the cost. For some days, I will not even come out of my house. He will not be

able to find me and later on he may forget my identity." He took out his handkerchief and kept the *rewris* neatly folded in it. A lover and gourmand are alike in one respect. Both have no patience. He could not wait for long and took out one piece and put it on his tongue and rolled it to relish the taste. He had severe acrid sensation on his tongue. It was not sweet at all. It was not rose petals. It was red chilies. He ran like a rabid dog with moist nostrils and lachrymal eyes and protruding tongue. He desperately searched for water to comfort his scalding tongue. After he had taken water and became somewhat normal he let out a torrent of choicest abuses directed at the costermonger. People had fun at this also. This is taken as a part of general celebration. These are not taken seriously and there is no retribution made.

At nine in the night the elite assembled in the open-air auditorium. The entire palace from the ground to the pinnacle of the high dome had been decorated and well lighted. A landscape architect had placed in the center of the open-air auditorium a beautiful water body. At the center of pool on raised high ground, there was a beautiful sphere. Out of the several holes in it emerged sprays of Rose and Sandal water. The fragrant moisture wafting in the air made it an out of the world display. There could not have been a better display of happiness on a historic victory.

His Majesty arrived at quarter to ten. He was wearing a white *achkan*[16] made of the finest silk and gold thread. His turban was worn at a slight angle. The diamonds and rubies worn by him on the finest silk

16. Man's knee-length coat, buttoned in front.

glowed in a radiant light. But his own personage had its own aura undimmed by the silk and the precious stones.

The function began with the famous poets of the period singing songs specially composed in celebration of victory. Sensing the impatience of those present, His Majesty directed that the musical programme should begin. The dexterous tapping by the experts on *tabla*[17] and the soft stroking of sitar's strings dispelled all drowsiness.

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The programme continued throughout the night. Svelte girls danced to the rhythm of the sweet music. Some dancers impressed the audience with their sinuous and sensuous movements. Others made the impact with vigorous and artistic movements of their limbs and body. Still others enchanted everyone with their mellifluous voice. There was hardly anyone who did not feel euphoric.

At four in the morning, it was Shyama's turn. Some of the people were tired by this time and languor was creeping upon their eyes. Some had wanted to leave. Shyama stepped on the stage when sleep and drowsiness were claiming people's attention. She simply stood with her head bowed. Her dress was neither gaudy, nor garish, nor costly. She was wearing a simple sari of the colour of ochre. Her rose petal lips had a subdued smile like the dancing rays of the morning sun on the opening buds. It was not a sight, which people expected. True beauty created by God in His munificence

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17. A pair of small drums.

is not in need of ornaments or ostentation. Wilderness unspoiled by human habitation is often more magnificent than any manmade garden. She sang,

"Sab din hot na ek saman"

The message writ large in the words of the lyric is:

"Do not be gloomy when times are bad or gloat when times are good. Everything is ephemeral and nothing will last."

This song was not new to the people. Most had heard it before. Wise men had always been telling that neither good times nor bad times last forever. This was a cliché everybody had heard. But now they began to understand and feel the true meaning. A man in the audience remembered the days of opulence, which he enjoyed earlier, and the dreary existence he had now. Some one else remembered his comfortable early years spent having fantasies of a wonderful future. But then the dreams got shattered. Vrinda was singing with feeling, remembering happiness of the bygone times. She remembered the crowds of favour seekers before her door. She remembered the well-attended musical evenings in her house when her husband was alive. She remembered the happiness that was hers and she knew that it as all over. The comparison between the times past and times now was too great, too stark, too depressing for her to continue singing. She got choked with emotion.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was intently hearing the song and watching her body language. His perceptive mind was trying to unfathom and understand the true meaning behind the words and the intensity of the feeling behind them. He did not utter a word in appreciation or applause. His pensive mood did not display any emotion. Suddenly he got up saying,

"Shyama, I must definitely hear your song again. Do come on next Thursday."

The intelligent Maharaja had understood that Shyama was not an ordinary singing girl in search of wealth or pecuniary benefit. The audience could not understand why Maharaja looked so grim and unappreciative.

* * * *

Vrinda had left her little son Raja to the care of Prem Singh. He got up in the morning and asked where *Amma*[18] *is.* Prem Singh took him in his lap. The child was too young to face the truth. Prem Singh told a lie, "She has gone to fetch sweets for you." This mollified the child. He went out to play with other children. Then he suddenly remembered his mother and the promised sweet. He came back to the house and said, "*Amma*, give me sweets."

Prem Singh gave him some sweets. He refused to take it. He wanted the sweet to be given by *Amma*. When a mother gives the sweet to a child, it is always sweeter. To distract his attention and to amuse him, Prem Singh carried the child on his shoulders and took him around the pathways in the fields. The child would sometimes see at trees, the birds, the plants and the animals and then would again star crying asking, "Where is *Amma*?"

The old soldier had no answer to this query. All he could do was to always sit with the child trying to keep him distracted with talks and stories. Raja, Vrinda's child, kept on crying and remembering his fond mother for several days and then slowly, over time, he forgot about her. Children are like that.

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18. A form of address to the mother.

Three months passed somehow. One day Vrinda returned. It was evening time Raja was playing outside the house with friends. He looked at her coming, hesitated a little and then ran to meet her clasping her legs with his little arms and cried with joy, "*Amma* has come, *Amma* has come."

Tears trickled from Vrinda's eyes. She picked the child up and held him close to her bosom and said, "Sonny, I have not come. I will come afterwards."

The child could not understand the meaning behind the words. He caught hold of her right hand and pulled her towards the house. She followed him as a loving mother would follow a fond child but she could not step across the threshold. Raja had crossed the threshold and was inside the house and he was trying hard with his little strength to get her in but she would not move. Big tear drops trickled from Raja's beautiful eyes and his sweet lips contorted into a sad expression. Then he cried. Prem Singh came out and saw Vrinda standing. He had not expected her. He said, "Vrinda!" Vrinda kept quiet, weighed as she was by emotion.

Prem Singh said, "Why are you standing outside? Come in, where were you so long?"

Vrinda wiped her tears and said, "I am not coming inside."

Prem Singh said, "Do not feel bad about what your old father said. Please forget it."

"Please *Baba*[19] , I cannot step inside."

"Why so?"

"I will tell you not now but sometimes afterwards. I have come today with one request. Please give me the scimitar."

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19. Form of address to father in north India and Pakistan. It has a Persian origin.

"What shall you do with that?"

"I have to take revenge. My honour has been slighted."

"Who is responsible for this?"

"Ranjit Singh."

Prem Singh could not comprehend this. He sat down on the floor. His legs could not bear the burden of what was going on in his head. He managed to say, "How on the earth will you get the chance?"

Vrinda answered, "Sometimes the cyclones lift even an ant with the dust in the sky."

"How can a goat fight with a lion?"

"With the help of this scimitar."

"No one has ever been killed with this scimitar surreptitiously."

"This is the scimitar of Vikramaditya and has always helped the helpless to achieve justice."

Prem Singh went inside and brought out the scimitar. Vrinda concealed it in her clothes and retraced her steps to Lahore. Sun had set in the west. There was still some crimson light. The cows and buffaloes were returning from pastures to see their calves in the owners' houses and Vrinda, poor Vrinda, was leaving her only son in tears towards the dark woods.

* * * *

Finally it is Thursday and ten O' clock in the night. Maharaja Ranjit Singh is sitting in all his glory in his luxury chamber. There is a magnificent chandelier with seven small lamps around a larger lamp. It looked as if a beauty queen, accompanied by her seven friends was sitting wearing translucent veils proudly aware of incomparable charm.

Shyama is sitting in front of His Majesty dressed

like an ascetic. She is singing beautiful songs while playing on a musical instrument.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh is really happy.

He says, "I am very pleased. I want to reward you for your excellent performance. Tell me what do you want?"

Shyama said, "Your Majesty is all powerful and in a position to bestow anything."

"Do you want a land grant?"

"Give me something befitting your glorious name and reputation."

Ranjit looked at Vrinda. Her simplicity was a testimony of her being not enamoured of wealth. Her gracefulness, her serenity clearly indicated that she was not a courtesan. He asked, "Do you want the *Kohinoor*[20] *?"*

"It is best suited to be in crown of your Majesty."

Maharaja Ranjit Singh could not believe this. Here was someone who spurns the offer of the most famous diamond in Indian History.

"You decide what do you want?"

"Will you give me?"

"Yes."

"I want justice and justice demands blood of the guilty."

Ranjit Singh had not anticipated such a demand. He looked towards Shyama and then started thinking as to why should justice demand blood."

He pondered, "This woman appears to be a victim. She must have been tormented by a cruel rich man or

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20. Kohinoor is the most famous Indian diamond in history dating from the time of Peshawar. Maharaja Ranjit Singh's grandson Duleep Singh, when still a minor, was prevailed upon to present it to Queen Victoria. It is now studded on the royal crown.

even a king. Maybe she is herself an ex-queen. Her husband might have been killed by some enemy. A victim of cruelty may himself become a bloodthirsty brute. For him vendetta is justice. What should I do? I have made a solemn promise. I must fulfill her demand. But whose blood does she want? His Majesty continued thinking, "I should not be bothering as to whose blood she wants. In the eyes of law and justice, all are equal. If demand of justice can be met only by shedding blood it must be shed, irrespective of whose blood it is. Justice has got to be done no matter who is involved. But who will decide as to whether demand for blood is justified?

Enmity distorts discernment and clouds reason. It may not be fair to let the complainant decide how the justice is to be achieved. Sometimes even an angry word can provoke a person to enmity. A verbal barb may lead to so much ill feeling that a blood feud results. A wounded beast may become so inflamed that only the sight of oozing blood of enemy can act as a balm on it. I have made a commitment, a solemn commitment, without knowing full facts. What do I do now?'

For a while the Maharaja continued to be in pensive mood. Then he asked, "Shyama who are you?"

Vrinda replied, "I am a helpless woman with not a soul in the world to care for me."

"Where do you live?"

"In Mahnagar."

The Maharaja looked at her again. The face looked familiar. He remembered having seen her few months ago. But there appeared to be lot of difference in her facial expression and deportment. The woman she had seen earlier was a simple unsophisticated person with eyes downcast with modesty. Now this woman has challenge in her eyes. That woman appeared like a true pearl but now the pearl appears to have lost its sheen.

Maharaja patiently asked, "Shyama, whose blood is to be shed for meeting the demands of justice?"

Vrinda said, "You decide it. I can only narrate the events. When your Majesty passed through Mahnagar and camped there, your soldiers forcibly took me to their camp. Now I am ashamed to go back to my house. I became an unfortunate target of their lusty looks, their vulgar words, their obscene gestures. Your Majesty was in Mahnagar when this helpless subject of your glorious empire suffered to decide whose blood will satisfy the demands of justice."

Maharaja Ranjit Singh could not look into her eyes. He looked downwards. Vrinda continued after a pause to catch the breath, "I am a widow. You are my king. You are my protector. I lost my husband three and a half years ago. After this I lived the life of an ascetic engaged in the memory of my dear husband and worship of God shunning all worldly pleasures. The sublime sanctity of my inviolate widowhood has been sullied by your soldiers. I feel so demeaned and so degraded that I demur even to hold and caress my child in my lap. The memory of that traumatic night makes my body and soul feel so polluted that I cannot face my friends. I cannot raise my eyes before my old father. Loss of fragile feminine modesty is more than the loss of life. Who does not know it? For the crime of abducting Sita, mighty Ravana had to lose his ten heads and his golden Lanka was reduced to ashes. Attempt to disrobe Draupadi led to death of the entire Kaurava clan. Men have shed blood to protect the honour of their women folk. Playing with women's honour has been the cause of fall of kings and dynasties and their blood has made the pages of History red. Now I stand before you with my sullied honour, seeking justice. You are my king, my

protector, you decide who is guilty and must suffer. You decide whose blood justice demands."

Vrinda's face was red with anger, with indignation and with suppressed anguish, which had found expression before the mightiest man who commanded authority to dispense justice. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was amazed at the boldness of a simple village woman daring to tell him what a king should do. Glass is a fragile brittle material but when broken, its sharp edges can draw blood. Human heart is no different. Maharaja Ranjit Singh had heard enough. His face turned red. Strong emotions surged through his veins. Men have been known to do the impossible under the overpowering spell of even passing emotions. Those who scream with pain when a mere pin pricks them can become emboldened enough to thrust a sword in their own hearts when swayed with tempestuous force of emotions. When feelings force a man he can walk through neck deep water holding his head high even though normally he may not go even for a stroll in a light drizzle without umbrella. We are creatures of emotions. Their noble intensity can make us surpass the Gods in excellence. The baser emotions can induce a person to do despicable acts.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh got up from his throne and walked a few steps towards Vrinda. He stood on his knees with his massive torso erect and said, "Shyama justice demands my blood. I am answerable for injustice done to you, for you having been tormented. Our wise ancestors have always said that before Almighty God, a king is responsible for the wrongful actions of his soldiers and subordinates."

The king opened the front button of his *Achkan* and bared his chest saying, "Shyama I know you are hiding

the sword of Vikramaditya in your dress. Take it out. It has always helped achieve justice. Let this magnificent sword be drenched with the blood of an unfortunate king who failed to protect his subjects from his soldiers."

Vrinda could not have wanted Ranjit Singh's blood. The vendetta in her mind gave place to respect and adoration. The king had owned the responsibility of his soldier's misdeed and was facing her like a convicted accused willing to accept death as punishment. Vrinda did not have the heart to accept the request or rather the command. When the grandeur, the glory and the power of kingship shows not arrogance but humility, who can take out the sword? Vrinda took out the sword but could not bring herself to lift it for thrusting into Maharaja's chest. It was unthinkable. Her mind hesitated. Her hands trembled. The sword fell down.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh understood that the woman's fortitude has forsaken her. He lifted the sword and like a man possessed by some supernatural force rose up and raised his right hand to thrust the sword in his own chest. But before that he prayed to the ten Gurus whose personal life exemplifies the highest standards of sacrifice and ethical excellence. Straightening his chest and looking towards the high heaven he addressed the formless God who resides in every form, "My God, let thy will be done." Then with a massive thrust of the sword he wanted to end his life.

In the meantime Vrinda had got up. She was dazed but alert enough to stop the downward movement of the raised right hand of the Maharaja with a strong clasp of both her hands and arms. Ranjit Singh tried to push her away but the forces of loyalty, devotion, dedication and faith held strong. Maharaja pleaded,

"Shyama let justice be done. Let justice quench its thirst with my blood."

Vrinda said, "Maharaja justice has already been done. Justice is no longer thirsty for blood. The scimitar of Vikramaditya is the witness."

Maharaja looked at scimitar. It shone in his hands like the crescent moon.

Prayers for the Dead
(*Fateha*)

Introduction

The border between British India and Afghanistan was officially divided by the Durand Line, which the latter never recognized. It is said that God created the world in six days and before resting on the seventh day, he dumped all the left over material in Afghanistan. It is mountainous, dry and inhospitable. The men here are as rough and tough as the craggy mountains around. They are quick to temper and live by vendetta. The enmities last long and ego is more potent than everything else. People live for honour, they kill and get killed for vendetta as feuds last for generations. Shedding blood for minor indiscretions is not uncommon yet loyalties are intense. After all, even the mightiest power of today could not locate Bin Laden in the area.

This story of Premchand shows us the interplay of the most basic human emotions in all their intensity. Emotions have to be intense where nature is cruel and it is tough to survive.

After leaving the government orphanage, I joined the Royal Indian Army. Compared to normal persons, I had a stronger muscular body with long sinewy limbs. My height was six feet, nine inches and in my platoon I was called a Titan. After joining Army my destiny took a turn for the better, my accomplishments were appreciated and resulted in higher pay and prestige. Everyone in the platoon knew me. The CO[1] Major Sardar Himmat Singh liked me immensely. This was natural, as I had once saved his life. Somehow I always felt a sense of reverence towards him. I always thought that I must honour and venerate him. Sardar Sahib reciprocated my sentiments with great affection and friendly feelings.

I have no memory of my parents. Sometimes when I begin to think about them, certain misty scenes appear. A family surrounded by tall craggy mountains and the face of a woman who was probably my mother are the vague images before my eyes. I was definitely brought up in the mountains. The government orphanage where I spent my child hood is in a village called 'Kalaha'. This village is one hundred and thirty kilometers away from Peshawar. The Himalayan air, water and soil

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1. Commanding Officer of an Army Unit.

comprise my body. I am a hugely built person, similar in physique and strength to the mountain tribes like Afridi, Gilzai and Mahsudi. The difference between them and me is that I am somewhat educated and able to observe elementary courtesies. Compared to them my conduct and conversation reflect culture and sophistication. Notwithstanding this, I look every bit like a man from the frontier[2].

Quite often I would feel an inner urge to move about aimlessly in the mountains, but the thought of livelihood would make me curb the desire. In this hostile and infertile land, one does not know where the next meal would come from. It was not uncommon for the local people to kill and be killed just for one loaf of bread. A man could maim a person and mutilate a body for getting a piece of cloth. For the sake of a single gun raiding the Army was not infrequent. Every member of these savage tribes knew me and lusted for my blood. Given an opportunity they would have been happy to liquidate me. In several skirmishes I had killed a large member of Afridis and Gilzais. I had arrested quite a lot of tribal men and put them in jail. I have lost count of the villages, which I have burned and devastated. Naturally I had to be cautious and I would not stay at any place for more than a week.

One day I was going to Major Sardar Himmat Singh's home. It was two hours after noon. We were in a leisurely mood because we had burned down several villages and there was hardly any fear of retaliation. We would spend the entire day gossiping and frolicking

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2. The area at the border of present day Pakistan and Afghanistan.

without any worldly worry. I felt somewhat bored and left for Sardar Sahib's house to get over the boredom. On the way an untoward incident happened an old Afridi, who was still strong enough to twist the neck of a young Indian soldier, was engaged in a hand to hand fight with a jawan[3]. Before I could react, the Afridi took out a sharp dagger from his waistband and pushed it down into the chest of the jawan. It was all done for looting the gun which the jawan was carrying with him. The jawan died instantly and the Afridi ran away with the gun. I quickly ran after him but the old man was running so swiftly that I lost track of him for a while. I continued running as fast as I could and reached close to the border. I was just ten yards behind him. He turned back and saw that I alone was chasing him. He took out the gun and fired a shot at me. I instinctively fell down. The bullet did not hit me, instead it scrapped the ground but he thought that I was hit and killed. He moved towards me with measured steps in a very cautious manner. I managed to stop my breathing, when the fellow came close to me. I pounced on him like a lion, with one hand on his neck, I thrust a dagger in his chest with the other hand and pierced his heart. That was the end of him.

In the meantime, others of my platoon had come and everybody was praising me. So far I was acting as if I was under the influence of some outside force but now that I realized what had happened, I felt a shiver after seeing his dead-body. I have lost count of the Afridi men I have killed but never felt remorse or fear earlier. God knows why I felt so bad this time. I just sat down looking at the corpse. The jawans were asking questions.

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3. Foot soldier

They were afraid that I might have been wounded. I slowly got up and quietly started walking towards the town. The soldiers followed dragging the body of the old man. The town people were so elated that they hailed and welcomed me with slogans in my praise. I silently entered Major Sardar Himmat Singh's house.

Sardar Sahib was busy writing something in one of the inner rooms. He asked me "Have you killed that Afridi?"

I quietly sat down and said, "Yes Sir, but some how I am having a feeling of trepidation, a sense of cowardice."

At this Sardar Sahib asked in a surprised tone, "Cowardice and Asad Khan? The two cannot be together in the same place."

I got up from the chair saying, "Sir, I am feeling a bit uncomfortable I do not know why, I have a tinge of fear."

Sardar Sahib got up and fondly patted my back and said, "Asad you are actually tired, it is nothing else. Let us go and sit in the verandah. The cool evening breeze will refresh you." Sardar Sahib and I went out and sat down on chairs in the verandah. Out-side the house, the old man's body was lying surrounded by a large crowd. When they saw that I was sitting in the verandah, the spectators started pointing towards me appreciatively. Sardar Sahib seeing this spectacle said, "Look Asad Khan! How they revere you, even the children of the area are praising your bravery and you still say that you are a coward."

With a mellow smile, I said, "I feel condemned by my own heart after killing that man."

"This is possibly because you have killed somebody weaker than you?" Sardar Sahib chuckled.

I made a gesture of agreeing. At that time an Afridi woman came slowly and stood in front of Sardar Sahib's house. Seeing her, Sardar Sahib's face became pale. His terror stricken eyes turned from her to me. I looked at his face with astonishment. An Afridi woman's muscular body could be the envy of many men. She was wearing a pair of khaki trousers and a thick blue shirt. Her head was covered with the *hizab*[4], She had the complexion of a blooming magnolia. Her face glowed with freshness of youth. Her eyes however bore a strange look, which could send up a shiver in anybody's spine. The woman looked first towards Sardar Sahib and then fixed her gaze at me in a way that terrified me. Then she cast a venomous look at Sardar Sahib and spat on the ground. She left slowly keeping her gaze fixed towards me.

Sardar Sahib regained his composure after the woman had left. It appeared as if a big load had been taken off from my shoulders. I asked Sardar Sahib if he knew her.

"Yes, very well. There was a time when she was crazy about me. Once she risked her life to save me, but now she hates the very face of me. She killed my wife. My mind turns into a virtual blank when I see her. That ghastly sight keeps on haunting me time and again. I cannot forget the scene," said Sardar Sahib taking a deep breath.

I confessed that her frightening gaze scared me as well.. Sardar Sahib then advised me with all seriousness, "Asad Khan be careful and vigilant. Probably this woman is related to the old Afridi. He may be her father or brother. The way she stared at you has to have a meaning and a reason. She is a dangerous woman."

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4. Muslim scarf

A shiver went down my spine. I hit upon an idea and made a suggestion, "Sardar Sahib why don't you hand her over to police? She will be hanged."

"Asad Khan, my brother, I cannot forget that she had once saved my life and even today she probably loves me. This is an old story. I will narrate it to you someday when time permits," said Sardar Sahib

This made me very curious and I insisted on hearing the story. After much reluctance he agreed, saying, "Asad I consider you as my brother. So, will not hide any thing from you." He continued the narration, "Five years ago, I looked much younger then I do now. I was under forty and had jet black hair. I had so much strength that I could have singly succeeded in a combat against two young soldiers. I have fought several battles against the Germans and I do not know how many of them I have despatched to the other world. After the World War, I was sent here as an incharge of the native platoon[5]. I faced some initial difficulties after coming here, but I was not deterred by them and eventually overcame them. First of all I learnt Pashto[6], then other languages and dialects of the area. I could converse at ease, as if I were a local man. This enabled me to move around in the interior area and eventually I became well acquainted with it. This exercise was dangerous and quite often I came face to face with death. Facing all these difficulties gave me a sense of security. My accomplishments in the area were considered creditable and were highly appreciated by the Government. Once

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5. Native platoon was called as Kali Paltan
6. The language of Pakhtoons the dominant race in North West Frontier Province in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The language is used by other communities in the area also.

Colonel Hamilton's wife had been abducted by the tribals and I single handedly rescued her. I have saved the lives of several Indian men and women.

This story begins three years after my arrival. At that time, we were fighting against Afridis. I was relaxing in our camp after a long strenuous duty, which had fully exhausted us. The soldiers were sleeping soundly and there was an eerie silence in the camp. A little while later; I also slipped into a deep slumber. Suddenly I woke up to find that an old Afridi, almost double my age, was sitting astride on my body and was about to push his drawn dagger into my chest. I was fully under his power and had no way to escape. I somehow retained my patience and poise and said in Pashto, "Don't kill me. I am an officer in the Army. If you abduct me, the Government will pay ransom to get me released."

God be thanked that my suggestion found his acceptance. He took out a rope, tied my hands and feet and loaded me over his shoulder and left the camp. There were violent scenes all around. He said something in a language, which was strange to me and I could not decipher it. He ran towards the forest with great speed as if the load of my body did not bother him at all. He was followed by the other Afridis of his gang. They were carrying a lot of booty.

We reached near a lake surrounded by big mountains. The water was clear and potable. There was growth of wild trees and bushes all around. The group halted near the lake and the old man who was actually the head of the gang, threw me on a nearby rock. I was terribly hurt and felt as if I had a broken bone in my pelvic region But thankfully it was not so. The head of the gang then asked me, "How much money will you be able to get for us?"

Suppressing my pain I told them, "It will be around five hundred rupees."

The headman said scowling, "No, I don't want this measly amount. If I get a pie less than two thousand rupees, your life will not be spared."

"The Government will not give this much money for a native Indian" I said after little deliberation.

The headman took out his dagger and said, "Then why did you say that the Government will pay ransom. You have to die for this." He proceeded towards me with dagger in his hand.

I said in a frightened voice, "OK Chief, I will get you two thousand rupees." He stopped and laughed so loudly that the dead mountains trembled at its echo. I knew he was a dangerous man.

The other men of the group now started placing the looted booty looted by them before the headman. This included several guns, bullets, clothes and items of food. My clothes were also searched. I had a revolver with six bullets. Seeing the revolver, the headman jumped with joy and fondly held it. The booty was distributed equally but in this distribution my revolver was not included. Being a special item it was kept by the headman.

After a little rest, the journey was resumed but before this my feet were untied. I was blind folded so that I would not know the path being followed. My hands were tied with a rope, the other end of which was in the hand of an Afridi.

It was a long, arduous walk. My feet were sore with pain but still I had to walk with them. It was height of summer in June and the intense sun had made the earth scorching hot, my throat was parched with thirst and my feet literally burnt. But they kept on moving and

talked with each other on the way. I could not understand anything, sometimes I could grasp a word or two but in general I remained unaware of what they talked. It was however plain that they were very happy with their victory and booty. One Afridi started singing a song in his dialect. The song was really good."

I asked Sardar Sahib, "What was the song about?"

Sardar Sahib said, "I do not remember the words, but I remember the idea and the feeling behind it, which was this–'An Afridi is leaving his home and tribe to go abroad. His wife asks, 'Where are you going?' The young man replies, 'I am going to get food and clothing for you.' The woman asks, 'Nothing for yourself and the children.' The young man replies, 'I will bring a gun for the son so that when he grows up he can get food and clothing for his beloved with that gun.' The woman asks, 'Tell me, when will you return?' The young man answers, 'I will return if I am victorious and get some booty. Otherwise I will die fighting.' The woman says appreciatively, 'This is really brave. You can go now, I am sure you will succeed.'"

Sardar Sahib continued the story, "I was really moved on hearing the song. By the time the song ended, it was end of the journey. They opened my blindfold. I could see it was a large valley. There were big caves around, which constituted their abode.

They searched my clothes again, except for my trousers, all my clothes were removed. There was a large rock nearby, it covered a dungeon. All the Afridis got together to move the rock, and then they took me towards the deep hole. My soul trembled with fear for I thought they were going to bury me alive in that grave. I looked at the chief with pained and longing eyes saying,

"Chief, the government will give me money. Please don't kill me."

The headman laughed and said, "Who is killing you? You are only being imprisoned here till the money comes. After that you will be free."

This was somewhat reassuring. My personal diary and pencil were placed before me and I was directed to write to the Commissioner for asking him to send two thousand rupees as the price of my life. I wrote a letter and gave it to them. They lowered me in that dark and deep well and took away the rope."

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Sardar Sahib took a long breath and continued with the story, "Asad Khan I was trembling to the core when I was being lowered in the well. There was a mild glimmer of light and not total darkness there. It was in fact a cave which was neither small nor quite large. The floor was rough and rugged. It appeared that over the years, flowing water had carved this cave in this mountainous area. There were small openings, which permitted some light and air. I started thinking about my predicament. My heart was really palpitating with fear. God had written torture in a dungeon in my destiny.

Nobody bothered to find any thing about me till sunset. I had not eaten a morsel since daybreak. I was feeling terribly hungry. I was cursing God and myself. When a man is helpless sometimes he even curses God.

Finally some-body threw four large *rotis*[7] inside the hellhole. I ran towards the *rotis* like a hungry dog. I

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7. Flat round unleavened bread cooked on a griddle.

was looking towards the opening wistfully. But nothing more was thrown, nor did anybody speak anything. I started eating the *rotis* without water and without anything else. Later on, in the opening which was like a slot, from where the *rotis* were thrown, an iron cup was kept filled with water. I was thankful to God for this small mercy, it was some satisfaction. I begged for more water but my request was met with a cruel and loud laughter. Somebody said in a clattering tone, "Now you will get water tomorrow. Return the cup, otherwise you will not get any water tomorrow." What could I do? I had to leave the cup as ordered.

Many days passed, everyday I would get four *rotis* and a cup of water. Slowly I adjusted to this desolate existence. The forced solitude did not hurt me now as much. Sometimes to while away time I would sing songs in Punjabi or Pashto. This would calm my nerves and take my mind away from my misery.

One night I was singing a Pashto song–*There are some heroes whose breath could scorch and kill. The hero pining for his sweetheart tells her, 'you have the fire within you which can burn the caravans. But that fire cannot hurt me. You know why? Because there is a fire of separation burning within me. Just listen when Laila my beloved comes here, cover my body with sand, otherwise Laila's heart will shatter like glass.'*

When I stopped singing, I heard a voice from one of the holes, "Prisoner, sing again."

I was startled. This was a pleasant surprise. I asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Turya[8] , chief's daughter," came the reply.

"Did you like the song?"

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8. Turya means divine state of blessedness.

"Yes, prisoner. I want to hear it again. Please do sing."

I was happy to sing again. After the song was over Turya said, "I will come daily to hear your song. In return, I will give you more *rotis* and water."

Turya left. Every night I would sing that song and she would listen. This was something to keep me pleasantly busy.

The days slowly passed, but no one sent the ransom money. Slowly I felt abandoned and doomed to die.

Exactly after one month, the headman himself came and said, "Prisoner if I do not get money by tomorrow, you will be killed. I cannot feed you forever." I had lost all hope for life. I could not swallow even a morsel of food nor could I take even a sip of water that day. I threw away the *rotis*.

Turya came at the usual time and said, "Prisoner, sing the song."

That day nothing interested me. I remained mum. She enquired, "Prisoner, are you asleep?"

I said in a melancholic tone, "Why should I sleep today? When I am going to sleep tomorrow for ever, never to get up again."

"Why, will the Government not send money?"

"It will but it would be of no use. By the time the money comes I would have been already killed."

"Please, sing. I assure you that I will not let you die." said Turya consolingly.

I started singing. After the song was over Turya asked, "Will you prefer to stay in a cage?"

I answered in approving tone, "Yes, at least I will be able to get out of this dungeon."

"Alright, I will tell my father tomorrow."

Next day, I was taken out of the hellhole. My feet

were tied to heavy wooden logs, which were strongly fixed with the rocks.

The headman told me, "You are hereby given a further time of fifteen days after that we will chop off your head. Now write another letter to your people. If the money is not received by the day of *Bakar Id*[9] , you will be ceremonially slaughtered on that day."

I wrote another letter requesting payment of ransom amount and gave it to them.

After he left, Turya came. It is the same woman whom you saw a little while ago. She was the headman's daughter. She would hear my songs and she had saved my life by pleading for me. Turya came and looked at me. I looked back at her.

"Who are the other people in your home?" asked Turya.

I said meekly, "I have got only two small children and no one else."

I said this because I knew that Afridis have great love for children.

Turya asked, "Don't they have a mother?"

To gain her sympathy I said, "No, their mother is dead. They are alone. I do not know if they are dead or alive as there is no one to look after them." My eyes swelled in tears.

Even Turya's eyes were moist. Restraining her surging emotions, she said, "So you have no one of your own to look after your children. Are they really alone? They must be crying very much".

The effect of my little lie made me happy but I

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9. The Muslim festival to celebrate the sacrifice by Ibrahim of his son Ishmael. He was not allowed to sacrifice the child by intervention of Archangel Jibral.

continued in the same tone, "Yes they must be crying. Who knows, they may be dead."

Turya cut me short saying, "I am sure they would not have died. Give me your address, I will find out." When I gave my address she said, "I know the area. I go there quite often When I go there the next time I will find out the welfare of your children.

"When?" I asked doubtfully.

"Next Thursday evening. Now please, sing the same song," she said after a little thought.

Today there was a great feeling of longing and enthusiasm in my voice. The song really affected her, she quivered. It appeared as if tears were trying to escape from her eyes. Her beaming face looked sallow.-She sat down trembling. I continued the song with increased vigour and zeal and said, "Turya if I die, please send the message to my children."

My words had the full-intended effect. She said in a choking voice, "Prisoner you will not die. I will ensure your freedom for the sake of your children."

I said despondently, "You will set me free but I do not know my way out of this forest.-Further setting me free can mean trouble for you. I would not like to put you in trouble for the sake of my life."

"Don't worry about me, no body can doubt me. I am the headman's daughter everyone will accept what I say. But you have to assure me that after returning you will send the money," said Turya.

I became happy and said, "I will surely send the money."

Turya left, saying, "I assure you that I will get you freedom."

After this incident Turya would always talk to me about my children. 'Asad Khan, believe me, that these

Afridis have a great fondness for children. God has made them savage in several respects but they have a tender heart as far as children are concerned.'

Finally Thursday came. The chief had gone out and had not returned. The men who had accompanied him had also not come. Turya came and said, "I can not go to your town tomorrow as my father has not returned. If he does not come back by tomorrow night, I will set you free. You go to your children but do not forget to send the money. I am putting my faith in you."

That day I sang the song till midnight and she kept listening. Then she went off to sleep. I kept on praying to God that the headman should not come back. My feet were so badly shackled that I found hardly any strength in them. My entire body pained. I thought living in the dungeon was better as I could at least move my limbs there.

The gang did not return on Friday. Turya was very worried. In the evening she came and opened the shackles on my feet and said, "Prisoner now you can go. I will accompany you and guide you for some distance."

The long incarceration and shackling had made my feet numb. I could not get up. After some time the blood began circulating in my body and I could get up with a prayer to God on my lips. I was very thankful to Turya for this freedom. We walked for some distance together.

Throughout the distance, that we trudged together, I kept on singing to keep her happy. Turya heard the song many times and every time her strong emotions showed through flowing tears. At midnight we reached the lake where I was initially brought by her father. Here she halted and told me, "Now you go straight without any turn. You will reach Peshawar. Be careful,

otherwise you will become a victim of some one's gunfire. Take this bundle, these are your clothes. Do not forget to send two thousand rupees. I am going to stand surety for you. If the money is not received, I will lose my life and you will lose yours. If the money is received, no Afridi will touch you even if you commit a murder. Now go to meet your children. May God be with you."

Turya turned back, humming a tune. It was quite late in the night. There was a terrifying silence all around. There was sound of mild breeze blowing through the tree leaves, which made the silence more sinister. The moon was shining brightly with all its majesty at the zenith. Because of the high visibility it was not safe to stay any longer at the lake. I slowly proceeded towards the south. I was looking around apprehensively for the fear of some unknown danger. With God's grace, by morning I reached Peshawar's border.

The border was guarded by soldiers. My return resulted in great excitement amongst the troops. They had taken me for dead. They were all happy to see me alive.

Colonel Hamilton himself came to our unit immediately after hearing the news and after hearing an account of my travails said, "Major Sahib, I was thinking that you are no longer alive. I did receive two letters from you. However, I thought that those were forged.-I could not have imagined in my dream that these would have been written by you. God be praised that you have survived the ordeal."

I thanked Colonel Sahib but in my heart I was thinking, "Since the note was signed by a native Indian, it was considered as forged. If a British or European had written it, they would have sent four thousand

rupees instead of two thousand rupees. They might have even burnt several villages and carried out some more retaliatory measures." I quietly went home. Meeting the children was a great satisfaction. The same day I sent two thousand rupees through a confidant to Turya.

* * * *

Sardar halted, took a deep breath and then continued, "Asad Khan, my story is not yet over. The tragic part still remains. After coming here I forgot all the miseries I had undergone. However I could not forget Turya. It was entirely because of her magnanimity that I could meet my wife and children. I had actually got a new lease of life because of her. How could I forget her?"

Months and years passed, I did not see either Turya or her father. She had sent a message but did not come personally. After coming here I sent my wife to her parents. I was afraid that if Turya comes and sees her I would be considered a liar. When Turya did not come for three years, my apprehensions ceased and I became carefree. I asked my wife to return home and we were living a happy life till the tragic hour struck.

One evening I was sitting in the verandah, talking with my wife and had gone in side one of the rooms for a while. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. The servant opened the door. A Kabuli woman boldly entered the house without any hesitation. She asked in chaste Pashto, "Where is Sardar Sahib?"

I came out of the room and asked, "Who are you and what do you want?"

She took out some corals and said, "I have come to sell corals. Do you intend purchasing?" and she spread large corals on the table.

My wife who was in the adjacent room came out

after hearing this. She picked up some corals and started looking at the stones.

The Kabuli woman asked, "Sardar Sahib who is this woman? How is she related to you?"

"My wife, who else?" I answered.

"Your wife had died. Did you marry again?"

I said in an angry tone, "Shut up you fool! You might have died." My wife did not understand Pashto and kept on examining the corals intently.

At this, there was a sudden gleam in the woman's eyes. She said with an acrid tongue, "Yes, I have been a fool otherwise why should have I let you free? Devilish cur, you lied to me, now have it. If your wife was not dead earlier she is dying now."

She pounced on my wife like a tigress and thrust a sharp dagger in her chest. I moved to stop her. She jumped into the courtyard and said "If you have not recognized me, then know it now. I am Turya. I left my father, my family, my tribe and came here to live with you as your wife and here I find that you are a liar and cunning person. Now for the rest of your life, you will pine for your wife and I will pine for you." She left with rapid steps.

I turned towards my wife. The dagger had pierced exactly through the heart. She had died with the single thrust of the dagger. Hoping against hope, I called the doctor. He could do nothing as she was already dead.

Tears swelled in Sardar Sahib's eyes, he stopped the narration to wipe the tears and then said, "Asad Khan, I could never imagine that Turya could be so demonic. If I had recognized her when she was talking to me I would have been wiser in my comments and the entire misery could have been avoided. The room was a bit dark and moreover with passage of time, I had become careless."

After that day, Turya did not come again to this house in my presence. If she happens to see me anywhere she starts hissing like a viper. My heart trembles and I become helpless every time I see her. Often I have thought of getting her arrested but when I see her, my limbs lose their strength, my boldness suddenly plummets.

I do feel that she still has some infatuation for me. She has quite often given costly gifts to my children. When she is unable to meet the children, she throws the gifts inside with a note attached. On the note, it is always written 'for the children of Sardar Sahib.' I have not been able to understand her. The more I try, the more difficult it becomes. I do not know whether she is a woman or devil incarnate.

At this stage of the conversation, Sardar Sahib's younger son came and showed a gold amulet and said, "Look father, that same woman gave me this amulet."

Sardar looked at me and said, "See, she has again gifted this costly item of gold. I have lost count of the gifts given by her to Arjun and Nihal. This is the reason that I find her to be a strange woman."

I took leave of Sardar Sahib. The dead body had been removed from the roundabout near Sardar Sahib's house. I felt a hair-raising sensation in my body when I reached there. I halted for a minute and looked back, the woman was following me like a shadow. Noticing that I was not moving forward, she also stopped and turned towards a nearby shop to purchase something.

I was debating in my mind whether it is Turya or some other woman. I was almost convinced that she was Turya and I wondered why she was following me. Thinking so I reached home and took my dinner. I lay on my bed trying to sleep but the events of the day had

so much shaken me that I could not sleep. The cantonment clock struck twelve, then it was one, soon it was two but still I could not sleep. I kept turning in the bed trying to fall asleep. Then, at one stage I dozed off.

Though I was sleeping, actually it was a state of trance. I felt that a woman resembling Turya but more terrifying than her in looks, had made an opening in the wall and entered my room. She carried a sharp dagger in her hand, its blade shone in the light of the kerosene lamp. She tiptoed with vigilant eyes towards me. I wanted to get up, but had lost control of my limbs. There was almost no life in my limbs. The woman reached near my bed. For a little while she looked at me, and then she raised her hand holding the dagger. I tried to shout but my voice choked. I could not utter a single word. She got on top of me pressing my hands under her knees. I was trembling with fear and opened my eyes. Surely a Kabuli woman was sitting on my chest and was about to thrust the dagger into my chest.

"Are you Turya?" I somehow managed to ask.

She was actually Turya. She forcefully pressed me down and said, "Yes, I am and today you have to die for having killed my father."

She raised the dagger. This was a moment of life or death for me. I was not willing to die. I had several hopes and aspirations. The longing to live gave me courage and I managed to free my right hand with a single forceful effort with all the force at my command. I caught the wrist of her hand that held the dagger. I did not know why Turya did not resist at all. She kept on looking at my hand and dismounted from the top of my chest. She was still looking at my hand with stony eyes.

I laughed and said, "Turya now the tables are turned. Now it is your turn to die. I have already killed your father and now I am going to kill you."

She was still looking at my hand and did not utter a word.

I shook her shoulder and said, "Why don't you speak out? You know your life is under my control."

She came out of her trance and said in a stable and firm voice, "You are my brother. You know you have killed your own father today".

I laughed on hearing this and said, "Today, I come to know that Afridis are bluffers also."

She said in a calm manner, "You are my long lost brother Nazir. This tattoo on your right hand is a definite sign that you are my brother."

Right since my childhood, I had always noticed that there was a sign of a snake tattooed on my right forearm. It was also mentioned in my official records as a mark of identity.

I said, "Turya you can't fool me. I am not going to let you go alive."

Turya threw away the dagger in her hand and said, "You are really my brother. If you do not trust me, look at the same tattooed sign on my right forearm."

I looked at her hand and saw an exact replica of the tattoo on my hand. After a little deliberation, I said, "Turya, I can not trust you. This is only a matter of chance."

"Leave my hand and rest assured that I will not attack you. I am an Afridi and cannot lie," said Turya.

I released her hand. She sat down on the floor and kept staring at me. Then she asked me, "Well, do you have any knowledge of your parents?"

"No, I was brought up in a government orphanage."

Hearing this Turya got up and said, "Then you are definitely my elder brother Nazir. You got lost one year before my birth. My parents had gone to raid an army unit. You had accompanied them, you were tied to my mother on her back. My mother was a strong fighter. By bad luck, she was hit with a bullet on her foot and somebody untied you from her back and took you away. My father carried my mother back home on his shoulders, but he could not locate you inspite of every effort made. Mother used to talk about you always. Even she had the same tattoo on her forearm." Then she again showed me her tattoo on her forearm. I compared the two tattoos. They were exactly alike; there was not even an iota of difference between them.-I was so perplexed that I literally fell on the cot.

Turya came and sat by my side and with great affection wiped the sweat on my forehead. She said, "Nazir, mother was very sure that you are not dead. She was confident that one day you would definitely meet us."

By now I had started believing Turya. My inner self told me that whatever Turya is saying is a fact. I sighed sadly and said, "Turya, did I kill my own father today?"

Her face was engulfed with grief. She said sorrowfully, "Yes Nazir, he was our unfortunate father. Who knew that he would get killed by the hands of his own dear son?"

Then she said consolingly, "But it is not your fault, Nazir. Destiny willed thus. You have done it unknowingly. I thought I have become absolutely alone after father's death, but now having found you I would be able to forget the loss of our father. Nazir don't take it to you heart. You never knew who is your father and who was your mother. I never knew that you are my

brother and I came to kill you, I would have surely killed you. It was God's immense compassion that I saw the family tattoo sign. Whatever has happened, was because of God's will. We are mere instrument in his hands."

Turya told me that my father's name was Haider Khan. He was the head of a clan of Afridis. I talked about Himmat Singh to Turya and she confided that she had started loving him. One day, she fought with our father and left home to get married with Sardar Sahib. But when she found out that he had a wife living, she turned mad with jealousy and anger and killed his wife. She had gone there dressed as a Kabuli woman for a little frolic but the events took a different turn.

I told her about Sardar Sahib's fond feelings for her. After listening, she thought for a little while and said, "No, I cannot agree with your opinion. The man is a cheat and a crook. However, for your sake I can condone whatever he has done. You can bring his children tomorrow. I will be kind and loving towards them and that is all I can do. I am not going to marry him at any cost".

Next morning my servant was astonished to see Turya. I told him that she was my sister. He was not willing to believe me. I explained to him every thing in detail and asked him to find out where my father's dead body was lying. He went to inquire and after returning told me that the body was lying at the Police Station.

I wrote a letter to Colonel Hamilton explaining every thing and requested for the custody of the dead body. His approval came in no time.

I requested Sardar Sahib to come through a hand–delivered letter. Major Sahib came and asked, "Asad, what is the urgent matter that you sent for me?"

I laughed and said, "Major Sahib I am no longer

Asad, my real name is Nazir. He gave me a surprised look and said, "Have you gone mad?"

I smiled and said, "No, Sardar Sahib there are more surprises for you. Turya is my real sister and the man whom I killed yesterday was my own father."

Sardar Sahib was stunned his eyes propped out of their sockets. He said, "You are making me insane."

I started walking towards the inner room where Turya was sitting. Sardar Sahib followed me as if in a trance. Seeing him Turya got up, laughed and said, "Prisoner, sing the same song again." I and Sardar Sahib both could not suppress our laughter.

I told the entire sequence of events to Sardar Sahib in detail. After hearing everything, Sardar Sahib said, "Now on, I am going to address you as Nazir. I also ask you for the hand of Turya. I want to marry her."

I simply said, "But you are a Hindu and we are Muslims."

He smilingly replied, "Army people are above the restriction of caste and religion."

Turya intervened, "But Sardar Sahib, I am not going to marry you. However, if you send your children to me I will love to become their mother." Sardar Sahib left with a pleasant frame of mind.

In the very evening Sardar Sahib, Turya and all colleagues of the platoon buried our father's body with customary rituals.

The sun had set. There was an increasing darkness around. I and Turya were reciting *Fateha*[10] for our father, together.

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10. Oblation made to dead ancestors by Muslims.

The Test
(*Pariksha*)

Introduction

This story pertains to the period when the Mughal Empire was at its decline. It had been weakened by the internecine fights within the royalty and nobility. Further blows had been struck by the rising Marathas, Sikhs, Rohelas and others. While Europe was seeing the surge of industrial revolution and experiencing a restlessness to conquer new countries and civilizations, the Mughal rulers were busy in the pursuit of pleasures of flesh and satisfaction of senses. There was no vision, no sense of future, no commitment to live up to the grandeur of Babur and Akbar. Mohammad Shah Rangeela was the king. He was a puppet in the hands of Sayyed brothers. Governance was the least of his concerns. Music, empty court manners were the hallmarks of the Mughal Rule. The blood of Taimoor and Chengheis Khan which flowed in the veins of Babur seemed to have lost its fervour in the passage of three centuries. It was at such a time when the Mughal Empire was tottering that Nadirshah came to give the final blow.

Premchand is angry at the moral degradation of the period and minces no words in saying so.

It is, the year 1738 AD Nadir Shah's forces have entered Delhi and are slaughtering soldiers and ordinary people mercilessly. There is panic everywhere. Practically every street is soaked with blood. There are sobs and screams of anguish everywhere. People have bolted their doors from inside for the fear of losing life. No one's life is safe. Many houses are burning, market places are being looted. All anguished cries for mercy remain unheeded. Even the women of nobility are being dragged out of their houses and are being molested. The thirst for blood of the Iranian soldiers is unquenchable. There are scenes of extreme cruelty, savagery and barbarianism everywhere.

During this time, Delhi was known as a place of fun and frolic, a centre of hedonistic pleasure. The rich lived in an ostentatious style and conducted themselves with needless formality. Rich women had no activity except purchasing and wearing costly dresses, applying makeup on their faces and limbs and indulging in meaningless frolic. The men had no activity except finding means to satisfy their lust. The governance had been abdicated. The royalty and the aristocracy were busy in dance, cock-fights and music. The revenue came from all-over the country and was spent with abundance by the ruling elite. Enjoyment of sensual

desire seemed to be the only occupation of idle rich. Prostitution paid dividends and pimping was not abominable. The wealth Nadir Shah saw after entering the royal palace was beyond his imagination. Nadir Shah was born in poverty. His entire life had been spent in battlefield. He had not developed the taste for sensual pleasures. There was a marked contrast between the hardship of a battlefield and the lavish luxury witnessed here. Wherever he glanced, his eye was transfixed to the opulence there.

Sun was setting. Nadir Shah was going through the rooms of the palace with his retinue. Everything that pleased his eyes was picked up. In the end he went to the special chamber where the Mughal emperor used to grant audience to the men from aristocracy, ambassadors and other men of status and means, the *Diwan-e-khas*. He sat on the royal seat, which was thickly upholstered and exquisitely embroidered. He kept his weapons aside and called the *daroga*, the incharge of internal administration of the palace. After receiving the obsequies salutation, Nadir Shah directed him, "I want to see a dance performance by the royal women. You are hereby ordered to get them dressed in the finest attire and be decked in the finest jewelry. This must be arranged immediately and no delay is acceptable. I don't want no as an answer from any royal woman."

The *daroga* was stunned at this stern command. The women, who were so secluded that even the sun's rays could not reach them, were being expected to come to this assembly and dance. This was unthinkable. There had never been such a dishonour of royal women before. He thought that Nadir Shah was a real devil who was not satisfied even after so much of bloodshed. He didn't like the order but had no courage to say a single word

or even to make a non-verbal gesture as a mark of disagreement. He bowed as a sign of customary respect to the victor and left for the royal *harem*[1] . He conveyed the command of Nadirshah and mentioned that no objection and no delay was acceptable to him. He bemoaned the fact that such a big crisis had never engulfed the royal family before. But now, there was no alternative except submitting to the command of the brutal invader to save the lives.

The royal women were shocked and surprised hearing this unusual and demeaning command. There was a deathlike silence all around. There was a curse in hundred hearts directed at the cruel conqueror. Some women turned their gaze at the high heavens seeking divine mercy. Some remembered God and the holy Prophet for deliverance from ignominy. No woman thought of the dagger or the knife as a way out of this shameful predicament. Many royal women had the blood of *Rajputs*[2] in their veins; their ancestors would have lit a funeral fire and jumped into it rather than submitting themselves to the lust of the enemy. But now sensual pleasures had extinguished the fire of *jauhar*[3] . The craving for luxury and indulgence in sensual pleasures had diluted and diminished their self-respect. Time was running out. There was no time to discuss with each other and devise a way to save personal, family and the Mughal honour. This was a critical moment for them.

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1. Women's quarters of Muslim house
2. Warrior class in India
3. An ancient custom among *Rajputs* in which their ladies, in order to save their honour from the conquering enemy hurled themselves on a burning pyre.

All women thought that there was no alternative other than to accept humiliating demand of the conqueror. The tears were trickling through their eyes. They were wearing jewelry studded with precious stones with heavy hearts. Kohl was being applied to the eyes moist with tears. They were anointing their bodies with perfumes while their hearts ached with pain. Some women were braiding their hair and tying pearl string around their braids. There was no single defiant woman, with faith in God who could say no to this order.

Within an hour all the women had got dressed in all finery, heavy makeup and costly jewelry. They did not need makeup. They were so beautiful that the glow on their faces could shame rosebuds with gold anklets jingling with every move of their feet, they went and stood in front of Nadir Shah in *Diwan-e-Khas*.

Nadir Shah made a sideward casual glance to this gathering of most exquisite fairies and then, surprisingly kept lying down on the embroidered cushions. He had kept his dagger and sword by the side. He dozed off in a moment. After a little while he turned his body to the other side and started snoring heavily. It appeared that he was in a deep sleep. He kept on snoring for half an hour. The royal women kept on standing with bowed head like portraits fixed on the wall. Some women were looking with sideward glances towards Nadir-Shah through the folds of their veil. They were whispering in hushed tones, "What a terrifying figure! What power drunk eyes! What a bulky body! He is a demon not a man."

Suddenly Nadir Shah opened his eyes. The fairies were standing as before. Finding Nadir Shah awake the royal women drew near to each other like a flock of

sheep. Their hearts were palpitating with the thought that the cruel conqueror would ask them to sing and dance. What shame and what ignominy. How could women of the house of Taimur do it? They wondered how they would manage. They wanted God to intervene. They felt entirely helpless. They had been humiliated enough. Some of them did think that they would not dance even if they had to lose their life.

Nadir Shah sat up and said in a stern and stentorian manner, "Royal women, I had called you to test your character. I am sorry to say that my opinion about you has been proved entirely right. A nation whose women lose modesty, sense of honour and self-esteem, cannot survive as a nation. I wanted to see if any of you had any modesty left, any sense of honour left. This was my only purpose of calling you. I didn't want to violate your modesty. I am not addicted to sensual pleasures. If I were so addicted I would have been busy tending sheep in the pastures of Persia. If I was lustful I would have been enjoying dance and music in Persia. I could have enjoyed all that in my own country and did not have to come here. I only wanted to know your real inner worth. I am really sorry that none of you has the fire of character or honour in you. Was it not possible for any of you to stamp my order under you feet? When you came here I gave you a golden chance. I pretended to sleep keeping my dagger and sword on your side and my face on the other side. There was not a single woman with the character courage or self-respect amongst you who could pick up the dagger and pierce it through by entrails. I swear in the name of all that is holy, that I would have been immensely happy if one of you had ever touched the sword for picking it up. I

would have bowed with great respect before those tender hands. I am ashamed to say that there is not a single daughter in Taimur's illustrious family who could raise her voice or hand, against the one daring to dishonour her. Now, this dynasty's days are numbered. It cannot last. Its glory is gone. Its existence is at stake. Very soon every vestige of this dynasty will end in this world. Now, you can go and if possible save this dynasty, otherwise it will bid eternal farewell soaked as it is with lust."

A Gift for Granny
(*Idgah*)

Introduction

Id-Ul-Fitr is the most important religious and social festival for the Muslims. It symbolizes friendship and fellow feeling. It comes after the month of Ramzan during which fasting is compulsory for all except for the sick and children. Id is a time of great fun for the children, they wear new clothes and have a right to expect and get gifts from the elders.

This particular story concerns a child who has no parents and is the sole hope of his old paternal grandmother. Id for him cannot be simply fun and frolic or acceptance of lavish gifts. Hamid, the child hero of the story, thinks beyond the horizon of a child and is caring and concerned about his grandmother than about his own needs. He symbolizes the true spirit of Id.

After thirty days of daytime fasting during *Ramzan,* finally it is Id. The dawn is pleasant and fills the heart with joy. The crimson in the sky, the green in the trees and the splendour of the swaying fields together present a mystic feeling. Even the sun appears loveable and cool as if wishing everyone a happy celebration of Id. Everyone in the village is imbued with the festive mood. People are making preparations to go to the *Idgah*[1]. Amidst all these, someone finds that buttons on his shirt are loose and there is just no thread and needle in the house. He naturally goes to a neighbours' house to borrow them. Another person discovers that because of long disuse, his shoes are now so hard and inflexible that they cannot be comfortably worn. He needs mustard oil to make the shoes flexible and has to rush to get oil from the oilman. Everybody is busy giving fodder and water to the oxen and other cattle. Otherwise the poor animals would remain hungry and thirsty because no one can comeback before noon. Young boys are happier than everybody else. They have got all the benefits of Id without even fasting. They had been wistfully waiting for Id and it has finally come. Unlike the elders they

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1. The Muslim place of worship

have no worry about running a home or managing other affairs. The children are impatient to go to the *Idgah* but before that they are equally eager to have the sweet and tasty *saivaiyan*[2]. The children are not bothered if there is no milk and sugar in the house. Making arrangement for milk and sugar is the concern of the elders. Eating *saivaiyan* is the privilege of the children.

Hamid finds solace and happiness sleeping and resting in the lap of his paternal grandmother Amina. Both his parents are dead. He has been told that his father has gone abroad to earn money and is sure to come back with lots of gifts and that his mother has gone to meet *Allah,* the Almighty God in his abode and would return with the finest of gifts. The thought of it makes Hamid very happy. One lives on hope, more so the children. Their fantasy can make a mountain out of a mole hill. Hamid has no shoes to wear. He has got a cap which is old and worn out and the golden lace on it, no longer glistens. In spite of all the unfulfilled wants he is a happy child. He has been waiting endlessly for his father to return with bags of money and for his mother to come back with lots of gifts. He knew all his wants and all his needs would be fully met to his heart's content when his parents return. Mohsin, Noora and Sammi, will all like to get similar gifts but may not have enough money to acquire those gifts.

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2. Wheat is made into small needle like pieces by twisting between forefinger and the thumb. This is dried under the sun or shade and then cooked as a sweet dish with clarified butter, sugar and water and sometimes milk. This is a specialty during Id. The dry fruit and raisin are optional additions. Strictly speaking it is not vermicelli.

Unfortunate Amina, has not even a single grain in her house. How can Id be a happy day for her? She was sobbing sadly. If Abid, Hamid's father were alive Id would have had a different significance. Id means little for those who have little to eat and little to wear. She is despondent but Hamid is joy and hope personified. He does not understand the reality of life and death and penury. There is light in his heart because there is hope. The hope and happiness inherent in Hamid's nature could drive away misery confronting him.

Hamid feels that his grandmother is crying because of his going alone and unaccompanied to the *Idgah.* He assures her, "Don't worry granny. I will come soon, sooner than anyone else does. You just have no reason to worry about me."

Amina's heart is full of anguish. All the children in the village are going to attend the festival, holding hands of their fathers. But Hamid had no father, no mother; Amina has to fulfill their role also. How can she allow Hamid to go alone with the crowd in all the hustle and bustle of the festival? There is every chance that the child may get lost. No, he should not go alone. Such a small child cannot walk six miles and that too without shoes. He may get blisters on the sole of his feet. She thought she may carry him for part of the distance, cradled by her arms. But she cannot do that. There is no one else to make *sevaiyan*. It might have been easier if there was milk, sugar and other essentials in the house or if there was money in the house to purchase these things. Then she could have cooked after returning from the festival. Things are naturally difficult when one has

to beg or borrow. She had got eight *annas*[3] as stitching charges from Fahiman. This eight-*anna* coin had been preserved since long as one would preserve one's integrity and chastity. It was kept for spending only on Id.

The milkmaid had pestered her the previous day for payment of arrears and was resolute that otherwise not even a drop of milk would be given. After paying her there were just eight *paisas*[4] left in the house, which included three *paisas* in Hamid's pocket and five *paisas* left with her. What can one do with so little on the grand festival of Id? Now, only God can suggest a way out. The washerwoman, the barber woman, the sweeper, all are going to ask the customary gift of cash or sweets. They will all expect ample quantity of *sevaiyan*. Where does she hide her face and why should she? This festival of hope comes only once in a year. If God blesses this home and the child, the difficult days will somehow pass. No one should go empty handed from the house on Id. The helplessness of her present state and the hope in the bounty of Almighty kept churning her mind.

The festive crowd left the village. Hamid was also there in the crowd. Some of the children would run or walk faster then others and then wait for others to catch on. The children could not understand why the elders were moving slowly. Hamid felt as if there were wings fixed to his feet. He just could not get tired. Soon they reached the outskirts of the city. On both sides of the road there were private gardens of rich people. All the gardens had strong boundary walls around. The children could see the trees laden with mangoes and

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3. One anna is one-sixteenth of a rupee.
4. One paisa is one-hundredth of a rupee.

litchis. Now and then a boy would pick up a stone and hit a mango. This infuriated the gardener who would come out showering abuses. This was all he could do as the children were at a safe distance. The discomfiture of the gardener was fun for them and they made funny gestures teasing the gardeners.

After the children passed by the gardens, they saw large buildings on both sides of the road. Firstly, there was a court building, then there was a college and then the children saw the local club. The children were discussing the likely age group of the college students. Someone commented that young boys don't study there instead there were big men with big moustaches. They found it without logic that some people could continue studying for so long. They were wondering as to what one could gain by studying so long. Hamid knew a couple of elderly boys studying with him in the *Madarsa*[5] . They were not interested in studies and were regularly thrashed by the teacher. Without doubt, the college students must be of that type. As regards the club, the children were unanimous in the opinion that magic shows were held there like the skulls of dead men wafting in the air. There could be other interesting shows also. The children knew that outsiders could not enter the club and only the British and their wives had unrestricted entry and could play. They were also sure that unlike the women in the club, their mothers, even if allowed to enter the club, could not play like the British women. If an Indian woman were to hold a bat in her hand and then move it around she was sure to fall and roll down on the ground.

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5. A school where Islamic religious education is given.

Mehmood said, "I swear by God that if my mother has to handle a bat her hands would tremble. Then Mohsin said, "You are wrong there. Our mothers can manually thrash and grind mounds[6] of wheat. I cannot agree that they cannot handle a small bat. Our mothers can draw hundreds of pitchers of water from the well and still not get tired. You know our buffalo daily drink five pitchers full of water. No *mem*[7] can draw even a single pitcher of water from the well. She will get dizzy doing that."

Mehmood again said, "These women can not even run or jump." Mohsin continued, "Yes I agree that they cannot jump and hop. A few days back our cow freed herself from her tether and ran towards Chowdhari's house. My mother ran so fast to catch her that I could not keep up the pace. I am not exaggerating. I swear."

The children continued moving forward. There were sweet meat shops in view. These were lavishly decorated. The children wondered who could eat so much. Every shop had several mounds of sweets. One child tells others, "I have heard that in the night the spirits from the other world come and purchase the sweets. My father told me once that a spirit in human form comes daily to all sweet shops and purchases all the leftover sweets and pays the price in real cash."

Hamid could not believe it. How could the spirits get the genuine rupee coins? Mohsin said, "Spirits have no problem, they can enter any treasure house. Even the steel doors cannot block them. They have got diamonds, rubies and other precious stones in plenty.

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6. One mound is equal to 40 seers. One seer is about one kilogram.
7. European woman.

They gift and bestow basketfuls of precious stones to the persons they like. You just don't know what all they can do. At one moment they are here, next moment they can be in Calcutta. It may take them just five minutes, no more.

Hamid asked, "Are they very big in stature?

Mohsin, "Every *jinn*[8] has got a head as big as the entire sky. If a jinn stands on earth his head would touch the sky. They can also become very small, a *jinn* can hide himself in a small *lota*[9] if he wants."

Hamid "How do you make a *jinn* happy? Tell me some incantation by which I can make a *jinn* happy?

Mohsin, "I just don't know but I know that Chowdhari Saheb has control over a large number of *jinns*. If anything were stolen in the village, Chowdhari Saheb would know the location of the stolen property and name of the thief. A few days back Jumrati lost the calf of his cow and for three days all his attempts to search for it, failed. Then he went to Chowdhari's house, who immediately told that the cow was in the kine–house. The calf was ultimately found from there. The jinns tell everything that is happening in the world to Chowdhari Saheb."

Now Hamid thought he understood the reasons behind Chowdhari's wealth and the respect that he commands.

The children moved further. Now they were in front of police lines. The children discussed that the police constables do their regular parade and exercises there. Someone said that the poor constables keep awake all night to prevent thefts. Mohsin disagreed and said,

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8. Spirit or apparition.
9. Small mug-like utensil.

"They keep awake not for preventing thefts. Actually they perpetrate thefts. All the thieves and dacoits in the city are in the close communication with the police. The policemen tell the criminals to steal in a particular locality in the night and then deliberately go to guard another locality and keep on howling "keep awake keep awake". You should know the amount of money these people get from thieves. My *mamu*[10] is a constable in the police station. He gets twenty rupees per month from Government as salary but sends fifty rupees per month to his family in the village. Believe me, I am swearing by God. I once asked *mamu,* from where he got all his money and he replied with a chuckle that it was God's bounty. He himself told me that if we want we can make a lakh of rupees in a single day, but then that would be risky and one may lose his reputation or job."

Hamid asked, "If the police steal things why should not somebody catch and punish them."

Hamid's naiveté merited a show of mercy from Mohsin. He said, "You fool, why don't you understand. How can anybody catch those whose duty is to catch others? But rest assured *Allah* will surely punish them. The ill-gotten money does not last. Some days back there was a fire in *Mamu's* house and everything got burned down, not even a single spoon was left. I swear by God that the entire family had to sleep under a tree for a few days. They borrowed a hundred rupees from somebody to purchase the essentials."

Hamid, "Are hundred rupees more than fifty rupees?

Mohsin, "Yes, fifty rupees means a bag full of money. For hundred rupees you will need two bags[11]."

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10. Mother's brother.
11. Reference here is to silver alloy rupee coins, which were larger in size than present metallic one.

Houses were now closer to each other. One could see swarms of people going towards the *Idgah*. People were wearing colourful clothes. Some people were traveling by *tonga*[12] some were riding in automobiles. Many had sprinkled drops of their choicest perfumes on clothes. Everyone was full of enthusiasm. A small group of villagers was going apparently unbothered about the distance, full of contentment and patience keeping up with the spirit of the day. For children everything in the city was new and strange to them. Their attention would be irresistibly drawn to something or the other and they would keep on staring unmindful of the honking horns behind. Once Hamid just escaped getting run over under a motorcar.

Finally, the *Idgah* came in view. The place was shaded by tamarind trees. There was a concrete area on which printed sheets had been spread. There were rows of worshippers standing in the area. The people who came late occupied the space where there was no concrete floor and no printed sheets. Nobody is bothered here about status and wealth. Islam considers all as equal. The villagers did customary ablution before standing in a row behind others. The arrangement made could not be faulted. There was perfect co-ordination. Lakhs of people bowed down together and then got up simultaneously. All their motions in the ritual of prayer seemed to be perfectly synchronized. It was analogous to switching on and switching off of a million lights. This was a glorious scene where a million hearts bound together by the chords of fraternity, faith, pride and bliss acted in unison in the worships of the infinite.

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12. Hackney-coach.

The recitation of holy Koran has been completed. People are embracing each other in a feeling of kinship borne out of faith. The congregation disperses after this and people turn to the shops selling sweat meats and toys. The enthusiasm amongst adult villagers is as intense as that among young children. There is a merry–go-round. One has to pay only one paisa coin and have a fun ride. While moving upwards one gets a feeling as if one is going to touch the sky. On the other hand while moving downwards, one is afraid of hitting the ground. There is another interesting contraption comprising a horizontal wheel moving around a central vertical axis. There are wooden camels, elephants and horses hanging vertically from the edge of radial bars emerging out of central wheel. One can sit on these wooden animals holding on to wooden handles for safety. It takes only one paisa to ride on one of the animals and the operator moves the entire contraption including the horses and the children riding on it twenty five times around the axis and that is real great fun. Mehmood, Mohsin, Noore and Sami all enjoy the ride on the mock horses and camels. Hamid does not join them. He stands alone at a large distance thinking about the abysmal inadequacy of money with him. He has got only three one *paisa* coins and he cannot afford to squander one third of his entire wealth just for a little fun.

Other boys get down from the swing and now it is the time to purchase toys. There is a row of shops selling toys. There is a large variety of beautiful toys on sale. There is a toy depicting a milkmaid and constable standing together. There is another one where a king and a pleader are seen together. There are others showing water carrier, washerwoman and a mendicant. The toys are very life like except that they cannot speak. Mehmood selects a soldier in khaki uniform with red

turban and carrying gun on his shoulder. The toy soldier appears to be marching in the parade. Mohsin picks the statute of a waterman with waist bend carrying a water bag made of animal skin on his shoulder. One can see his right hand holding and squeezing the opening of the water bag so that the water does not escape. The waterman appeared to be singing a song and enjoying it. His body language conveys as if he is about to discharge water from the water bag. Noore prefers the statute of the lawyer. He has a scholarly countenance and is wearing a black gown over a white *achkan*[13] . One can also see a pocket watch with a golden chain and a thick law book in his hand. One would feel as if the lawyer is just coming out of the court after arguing on a weighty matter. All the toys are uniformly priced at two *paisa* each. Hamid has only three one *paisa* coins, the toys are too costly to purchase. He counsels his mind by the thought that the expenditure is not worth it as the toys are easily liable to fall and break. They are also liable to have the entire color painted on them smudged in contact with water. He convinces himself that these toys were of no worthwhile use to him.

Mohsin said, as if in a fantasy, "My waterman will daily fetch water twice a day, in the morning and evening."

Mehmood claimed, "My soldier will guard my house and will fire with his gun if any thief dares to intrude."

Noore said, "My lawyer will successfully argue in the court"

Sami said, "My washerwoman will daily wash our clothes."

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13. Knee length coat buttoned in front.

Hamid is not impressed and says they are made of earth only and if they happen to fall they will turn to earth again. Even after having said so he is wistfully looking at the toys. He very much wants to hold the toys in his hands for a little while. Unconsciously his hands turn towards the toys but the other boys are not selfless saints to allow him to hold the toys, especially when these had just been purchased. Hamid's longing remains unsatiated.

The boys now turn to sweet shops. One boy purchases *rewari*[14]. Hamid unfortunately cannot join them. He has got three paisas only. Another child prefers *gulab-jamun*[15]. The third one purchases *Sohan-halwa*[16]. Hamid unfortunately cannot join them. He has got only three *paisas*. He is content looking at others enjoying themselves. The longing in his heart cannot be fulfilled for want of money.

Mohsin says, "Hamid take one *rewari* and just taste it. It tastes and smells excellent."

Hamid felt that it could be a joke. Still he is tempted at the offer. Mohsin takes one piece of *rewari* from the lot in his right hand and extends it towards Hamid. Hamid stretches his palm but Mohsin, instead of placing the *rewari* on Hamid's hand puts it in his own mouth. All the boys clap and laugh in fun and derision. Hamid blushes shamefaced in embarrassment.

Mohsin, "OK, Hamid, this time Allah is witness, I will surely give you a *rewari*."

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14. Tablets made of jaggery or sugar paste and covered with sesame seeds. It is quite favored in North India for its taste and crunchy feel.
15 It is made of cottage cheese and sifted wheat flour, which are made into round balls and fried in oil on low heat and then dipped and served in hot sugar syrup.
16. Another tasty sweetmeat.

Hamid, "I don't need your charity. I have got my own money.

Sami, "In three *paisas* what can you do?"

Mehmood, "Hamid, share *gulabjamun* with me. I am not like Mohsin who is a rascal."

Hamid, "The sweets are not such a blessing that I should crave after them. In our text book all the disadvantages of eating sweets are listed."

Mohsin "No matter what you say, you must be craving in the core of your heart to eat something. Why don't you take out some money and spend it?"

Mehmood, "I now understand his cunningness. After we have spent all our money he will purchase the sweets and then eat it to tempt and tease us."

The boys then turn to other shops. There were items made of iron and other metals and alloys. Hamid halts at the shop selling iron goods. He notices that some large forceps made of iron were on sale. These are handy and inexpensive devices to turn the *roti* on the griddle as also to shift burning embers in the fireplace. Hamid notices that several kitchen forceps are lying there. He remembered that his grandmother had no such contraption with her. Quite often her finger would scald while removing the *rotis* from the hot griddle. He thought that if he purchases the kitchen forceps for his granny, she will be really pleased. Her fingers will never scald again. Their home will have another useful item in its inventory. It is much better than purchasing a toy, which is sheer waste of money. When one purchases a toy, one gets only momentary happiness. When the momentary charm is over, no one looks at the toy again. Moreover, there is quite a chance that the toy may break into pieces before one reaches home. The kitchen forceps is a wonderful appliance. One can remove the *rotis* from

the grid and then place these directly on the burning embers so that they turn into the shape of round balloons. If somebody comes to borrow fire[17] from the house one could take a burning peace of wood or coal and oblige a neighbor who can take it and light the fire in his fire place. He thought that granny had no time to go to the market and purchase kitchen forceps by herself. Moreover, it costs money, which is never in plenty. His poor granny gets her hands scalded almost daily.

While Hamid is ruminating thus, his friends move on. All of them are having sweet water from the *chhabil*[18]. Hamid keeps on thinking about the sweets, he feels that all his friends are a selfish lot. They purchased the sweets and enjoyed eating the same and nobody offered him even a single bite. The train of thought continued, "They are not good friends. They want my company when they have to play or undertake a task but my company is not required while eating sweets. I must decline their company in future. Let them eat sweets alone. Too much of sugary stuff causes festering eruptions on the skin. The craving for sweets may tempt them to steal money from the house and purchase sweets surreptitiously. All this is written in the books and the books cannot be wrong, I am not going to spoil my habits. When I go home with the kitchen forceps my granny will be overcome with emotion and will embrace me with fond feelings and affection. She will give me a thousand blessings. She

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17. There was no Lucifer or safety matches in vogue at that time.
18. In certain religions functions it is customary to offer sweetened and flavoured water to visitors free of cost. The place where it is so distributed is called *chhabil*.

will show it to the neighbouring women with pride. The entire village will know about this purchase and discuss it. Everybody will know that I am such a good boy. Other boys have purchased toys for themselves. Who will bless them and pray for them? When the elders pray sincerely for the youngsters, God listens and acts. I have no money that is why Mohsin and Mehmood act haughty. I can also act haughty. Why should I bother about anyone when I am not interested in their toys and sweets? I may be poor, but I am not a beggar. One day my long departed father will come. My mother is also sure to return. They will bring for me basketsful of toys and sweets. Then I will ask them, how many toys you need? I will give one basket of toys to each one of them. Then they will know how friends are to be treated. I am not petty minded like them as would purchase one paisa worth of *rewaris* and eat it without sharing. I cannot tease and tempt another, the way they do. Now, when I purchase the kitchen forceps they are going to make fun of me. Let them ridicule me, I am not bothered."

Hamid turned to the shopkeeper and asked, "How much do this forceps costs?

The shopkeeper was amazed at this query by a child unaccompanied by an adult and said, "It is not of any use to you."

Hamid asked, "Is it on sale or not?

The shopkeeper replied, "Why? It is definitely for sale, otherwise I would not have brought and displayed it here."

Hamid, "Then why don't you tell me how much it costs?"

Shopkeeper, "It costs six paisa."

Hamid's heart sank; he managed to say, "Tell me

the correct price." The shopkeeper said, "OK, I will charge five paisa. If it suits you take it, otherwise move on".

Hamid was nonplussed but he managed to gather his nerves and say, "Will you take three paisas?"

Hamid had no hearts to wait for the reply. He did not want to hear harsh words from the shopkeeper. He stepped forward leaving the shop. But there were no harsh words. The shopkeeper gave him the forceps for three *paisas,* which was the entire money with him. Hamid took it with pride and held it with one end in his right hand and the other on his shoulder as if it was not forceps but a gun. He marched with rare conceit to his friends to face boldly their reaction and taunts.

Mohsin was the first to react, he laughed and asked, "You crazy boy! Why have you purchased the forceps? To what use will you put it?"

Hamid banged the ground with his forceps, "You just keep your waterman on the ground. My forceps can swat all his ribs."

Mehmood asked, "Is this forceps a toy?"

Hamid replied, "Why? It is definitely a toy. When I keep it on the shoulder it is a gun. If I keep it in my hand it is the forceps of the mendicants. I can use it as a musical instrument like the *manjeera*[19] . My forceps is so strong an instrument that I can smash all your toys. All your toys can get together and mobilize all their resources and yet would not succeed in damaging my forceps. It is as indomitable as a lion."

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19. A steel forceps-like musical device having small round brass plates loosely fixed on both its limbs like a cymbal. When pressed, there are musical notes produced. Even today it is used in religious congregations.

Sami had purchased a tambourine. He was very much impressed with Hamid's statement and offered barter. He said, "I have spent eight *paisas* on my tambourine. If you like you can exchange your forceps with my tambourine."

Hamid looked at the toy tambourine with disdain and contempt. He said, "What is so great about your tambourine? It is only flitted with this weak parchment and gives a little sound when stuck. It will be surely damaged with a little contact with water. My brave forceps can tear the entrails out of your tambourine. My bold forceps will stand the ground in fire, rain, storm, blizzard."

Hamid's talk and confidence had impressed all others. Unfortunately they all had spent their entire money. Moreover they had moved quite away from the festival site and shops. It was already nine and the summer sun was rising and turning the heat on. Everybody was in a hurry to reach home. They simply could not get the kitchen forceps now. Everyone knew that even if he were to ask his father, he would not purchase a forceps and oblige by getting it to the child. Now every child was convinced that Hamid was a clever and cunning fellow and they knew the reason for his not having spent money on sweets and play-rides.

There was division amongst the children now. Mohsin, Mehmood, Sami comprised one group. Hamid was the solitary soldier on the other side. They were walking and arguing in real earnest. Suddenly Sami became a renegade and joined Hamid. Mohsin, Mehmood, Noore were all elder to Hamid by one or two years each but they really felt terror-stricken with Hamid's barbs. There was no comparison between the two sides. Hamid had the power of reason and the force

of logic with him. On one side there is the amorphous earth and on the other side there is iron in the garb of steel. Steel is unconquerable, it is fierce and it is deadly. If a lion comes, Mr. Waterman would loose his nerves, Mr. Soldier will abandon his earthen gun and run for life, the pleader will lift his gown and cover his face and fall on the ground. But this brave forceps has got the force and the drive of the boldest wrestler of India and would even jump on the lion's head and remove its eyes.

Mohsin finally came up with the best argument that he could and said, "The forceps cannot fill water in a pitcher." This was the maximum he could say.

Hamid raised the forceps in his hand and said, "A little display of anger by forceps will make him go running for water to sprinkle at the door step." Mohsin stood sadly defeated.

Mehmood added ammunition in Mohsin's support, "My dear kid, if ever you are caught by the police you will be running around in the courts with hands and feet tied. Then you will have to touch the holy feet of my pleader."

This was too strong an argument to be effectively answered by Hamid. He asked, "Who is going to apprehend me?"

Noore said haughtily, "This constable holding the gun."

Hamid grimaced in derision and said, "Oh, this helpless constable is going to catch my invincible forceps–the bold Mr. India."

"OK, lets us have a duel between the two. Your constable is going to run away from the field noticing the very appearance of my Mr. India."

Mohsin had a new brain wave. He said, "Your

forceps will have its face burnt daily in fire." He had thought that Hamid will have no answer to his brilliant statement, but it did not happen.

Hamid promptly retorted; "Only brave people can have ordeal of fire. Your lawyer, your constable, your waterman will go and hide themselves like little girls in the safety of their houses. Jumping into fire is a task, which only my Mr. India can undertake."

Mehmood put across another argument, "The lawyer is going to sit on a chair in front of a table and your forceps will lie on the floor of the kitchen."

This argument impressed and emboldened Sami and Noore. After all the forceps has no place except the kitchen floor[20]. Hamid could not think of an appropriate logical reply. He decided to bluff his way out. He said, "My forceps will not stay in the kitchen. When the lawyer sits on the chair it will go and remove the chair from under him and throw him down on the ground. Then it will take all the law and shove it down his throat."

This was not logical. It was definitely abusive language. However, the claim of shoving the law down the throat had a terrifying effect. The other three brave boys were looking stunned as if in a kite flying competition some opponent's kite has effectively cut the string of their kites. Ideally law and logic have to appeal to one's intellect, it is not something, which can be shoved down somebody's throat. Inspite of being illogical the new argument stood the ground effectively. His forceps was accepted definitely as Mr. India. On

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20. That time and even now in villages it is customary to cook squatting on the floor sitting on miniature stool which is about four inches high.

this point now Mohsin, Mehmood, Noore and Sami had no ground to object.

The victor is entitled to get the respect of the vanquished. Hamid definitely got that. Others had spent four to five times the money spent by him and still had failed to acquire anything worthwhile. Hamid had better deal in mere three *paisas*. Now everybody agreed that the toys are fragile and are bound to break sooner or later and Hamid's forceps will last for years.

Now, it was time for truce. Negotiations for reconciliation began. Mohsin said, "You allow us to hold your forceps in our hands, in return you can also see and hold my waterman in your hands."

Mehmood and Noore likewise offered to Hamid that he could hold their toys also in his hands. Hamid had no objection to accept these conditions of truce. Each one held other belongings in his hands. Hamid felt that the toys were really beautiful.

Hamid made a placatory move and said, "I was only teasing you. Honestly I agree that my forceps is no match to your toys. These toys are so life like that it appears that they are going to open their mouths and say something."

However, this was not sufficient consolation for the vanquished party. Enough had been said in favour of the forceps. Nothing could now tarnish the image of forceps.

Mohsin said, "No one is going to bless us for these toys."

Mehmood joined, "What to talk of the blessings, we are likely to get thrashing. My mother is definitely going to criticize me for purchasing these toys made of mud."

Hamid had to concede that after seeing the toys their mothers are not going to be as happy as his grand mothergranny would be, seeing the forceps. Hamid

knew he had not much choice. All that he had was three paisa he could not have purchased anything better. In any case now it is accepted by everybody that his forceps is Mr. India and king of all toys, he thought.

On the way Mehmood felt hungry. His father had given him bananas to eat on the way. Mehmood shared the bananas only with Hamid. Other friends kept looking at the bananas longingly. One can call it as blessings received because of the forceps.

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The children and others reached home at eleven. A great welcome awaited them. Those who had stayed at home were thrilled to meet those who had returned. Mohsin's younger sister snatched the toy waterman from Mohsin and jumped with joy. The waterman could not withstand the jolt and left this mortal world. The brother and sister pounced upon each other on this unanticipated development and thrashed each other. After mutual beating, both cried in pain and anger. Their mother did not like so much of noise and administered a couple of blows to both of them.

The end of the pleader, which Noore had purchased, was more glorious keeping in view the dignity attached to the lawyer's noble profession. You should not beep a toy lawyer in a niche in the wall or on the floor. One can't forget that theirs is a dignified profession. Two pegs were driven in the wall and on that a horizontal plank was placed and on that a paper carpet was spread. The pleader was adorned on the throne like a king. Noore brought his hand fan and swung it so that the lawyer could be comforted with a little breeze. In the courts there are electric fans and the use of moist

khas–khas[21] screens. In Noore's abode the lawyer deserved at least a little breeze from hand fan to keep his mind cool otherwise all the heat generated by legal arguments could strain his body system. Noore was swinging his hand fan made of bamboo strips. Somehow either by the sway of the wind generated by the fan or by its direct hit the toy lawyer fell on the ground and the earth returned unto earth. This was the end of the short and ephemeral life of the honorable pleader. The obsequies were intense and loud and finally the last remains of the toy pleader were consigned to the waste bin.

Mehmood's soldier still remained alive. He was assigned the charge of guarding the village. However it was realized that a policeman is quite unlike a village watchman and should not be walking on its own two feet. There was the need of a palanquin. A basket was managed as a substitute for palanquin. Some red pieces of old cloth were spread for the constable to lie on. Noore picked up the basket as a palanquin carrier and went around the village accompanied by his two younger brothers. All the three would keep on saying, "Don't sleep, keep awake." This march around the village continued late in the night. Unfortunately Mehmood stumbled and fell down. The basket fell a little away and the brave soldier with its gun was grounded. One of his legs got broken. Mehmood had a sudden realization that he was an orthopedic surgeon. He knew that the secretion of fig tree had adhesive property. He managed to get some secretion and join the broken piece of the leg to rest of the body. Duly joined

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21. Screens made of coir and husk, kept wet and air is blown through them to keep the area cool.

the soldier is made to stand but the leg got separated again. The orthopedic treatment was considered as having been unsuccessful. So it was decided to break the other leg also so that the constable could sit down at one place. With one leg the constable would neither stand nor walk nor sit. Now he is more like a hermit confined to a single place but his benevolence extends all over the village. He guards over the village by remote control. Sometimes he is deified as a supernatural being. The children have removed his ceremonial cap. They have full freedom to carry out any physical transformation of the constable. Sometimes he was even used for weighing vegetables and grains in the weighing balance.

Now let us have a flash back to Hamid. When he returned home, Amina, his granny, got up and ran to pick up Hamid and held him in an affectionate embrace. She noticed the kitchen forceps in his hand and was surprised to see it. "Where did you get this forceps from?" she asked.

Hamid replied, "I purchased it."

She asked, "How much did you pay for it?"

Hamid, "Three paisa."

Amina was sorry to hear it. She banged her breast with both her hands in dismay, "What a stupid child Hamid is?" It is almost the noontime and he has not eaten anything and he brings a forceps, which is of no use to him. She asked, "Could not you see anything else in the festival grounds that you had to purchase this contraption?"

Hamid felt as if he had sinned, still he said, "Your fingers scald while cooking, that is why I purchased it."

The old woman had a change of heart. Her anger

turned to fond affection. The surge of affection did not find verbal attribution. It was silent, unexpressed love, succulent, sweet and real. She wondered how the small child could have resisted temptation to purchase toys and eat sweets. He would have seen everybody doing it and still how he would have managed to resist himself of all the temptations, enticements, attractions and diversions of the festival and still think of his old granny.

Amina was overwhelmed with a combination of pleasant emotions of love, affection, hope and contentment.

This was something strange. Hamid, the child, had behaved as if he was an old man with responsibility to act as provider for the home. The old granny, Amina, was now like a child. Her eyes were misty with tears of joy and happiness. She was thankful to the high heavens and God above for this blessing. The teardrops she shed, spoke a language, which Hamid could not comprehend.

Justice without Bias
(*Panch Parmeshwar*)

Introduction

Panchayat is a time honoured Indian institution. The *panchas* were chosen out of the community by the common consent to decide on disputes amongst members of the community. They derive their authority not from the royal sanction but from the respect that the average Indians had for the traditional concepts and institutions. It was believed that when *panchas* spoke, it was not their word that emerged from their tongue but it was God's will articulating itself through their lips. An ordinary person chosen by common consent to be a *panch* would feel so much spiritually elevated that personal bias or animosity was unthinkable. He had to live up to the faith confided in him and nothing shallow or petty could be expected from him.

In the present period of increasing cynicism about judicial probity and efficacy it is refreshing to remember that there was a time in India when ordinary people with ordinary background and no legal knowledge could act as judicial officers simply without being swayed by passion or prejudice. The Panch Parmeshwar recreates a picture of the pristine past, which is in sharp contrast to Imrana's case today. The story pertains to the period when an oath had sanctity and trust could not be betrayed.

Jumman Sheikh and Algoo Chowdhari were thick friends. Their friendship transcended religious taboos and restrictions. They had unshakable faith in one another. When Jumman went to Mecca and Medina[1] for performing *Haj*[2] he entrusted the care of his house and other assets to Algoo Chowdhari. Similarly Algoo Chowdhari would entrust care of his house and property to Jumman whenever the need arose. Their friendship was based on commonality of ideas and interests, which is the essence of true friendship.

Their friendship grew and took roots in their school days. Jumman's father Jumrati was the village schoolteacher and had taught his son as well as Algoo in their childhood. During those times, imparting education was considered to be the highest gift and the teachers were held in high reverence. Algoo's father was strongly of the view that education was acquired primarily because of the blessings of teacher and not by merely pouring over the books. To earn the blessings of the teacher it was considered essential to serve him with devotion and dedication. Algoo would fill Jumrati's

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1. Muslim places of worship in Saudi Arabia where they are ordained to go at least once in the lifetime. This pilgrimage is called as Haj.
2. Please refer Note No. 1

hubble-bubble with water, put crushed cowdung cakes and tobacco in his *chilum*[3] and ignite it so that Jumrati could enjoy smoking it. He would scrub and clean used utensils and ensure that nothing was lagging in his services to the teacher. This excessive devotion however resulted in neglect of studies as every *chilum* filling and igniting operation took half an hour. The noble intentions and the noble deeds had no beneficial effect. Algoo and his father had, however, no regrets. Algoo had done the best he could to acquire education but destiny willed otherwise. This was his solace and consolation.

Jumrati Sheikh, himself, was no believer in the efficacy of blessings. He knew that knowledge is power. He commanded respect in several nearby villages because of his knowledge and drafting skills. The mortgage and other legal documents drafted by him were so flawless that no court official could find single error. The local postman, the village constable and the *tehsil*[4] peon all sought his guidance, advice and blessings. Under his guidance Jumman had studied well. While Algoo's status rested on his money and that of Jumman primarily on his priceless educational expertise.

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Jumman Sheikh had an old *khala*[5], who was childless and had no close relative other than Jumman Sheikh.

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3. The part of hubble-bubble in which tobacco is smoked. It can be independently used for smoking without hubble-bubble.
4. An administrative and revenue collection unit lower than a subdivision.
5 Mother's sister

She owned some property. Jumman Sheikh persuaded the old widow to transfer the property by sweet talk and tall promises. The old lady was lavishly entertained till the gift deed was registered. Delicious dishes were specially made for her. She was literally deluged with *halwa*[6] and *pulao*[7]. However the moment, the gift deed was affixed with the registration seal, her fate was also sealed. Kariman, Jumman's wife would serve the old lady with chapattis and little curry or *dal*[8] every day. This, of course would be lavishly leavened with pungent words. Even Jumman Sheikh did not seem to have any kind words for his *khala*. Jumman's wife claimed that the gift deed had been a bad bargain for them. For a few hundred yards of infertile land they had been taken for a ride. She would grumble that the old woman expected clarified butter every time she had *dal-roti*[9]. Kariman sorrowfully claimed that the amount of money spend by them on her upkeep was so much that they could have purchased a couple of villages in that amount.

Khalajan could hear and only sigh and suffer. However, over a period of time Kariman's taunts became unbearable and the old woman mentioned the matter to Jumman. Jumman did not consider it prudent to meddle in domestic matters of his wife. This situation of unease continued for sometime. Finally fed up with daily insults and innuendos the old lady told Jumman, "Son, now it is no longer possible for me to live and

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6. Sweet dish made of semolina, ghee and sugar. Quite popular in north India and Pakistan.
7. Dish made of rice boiled in soup and spices
8. Porridge or soup made from split peas or pulses.
9. Staple food in north India consisting of chapatti and dal; daily bread.

cope up in your house. You should give me a reasonable amount so that I can cook separately for myself and eat."

Jumman was as mean as he could be, he replied, "Does money grow here on trees?"

The old woman asked in all humility, "Don't I deserve and need even a bit of frugal meal?"

Jumman got serious, "I never thought that you had enmity with the angels and you would continue living so long."

This infuriated the old woman. She threatened to go to the *panchayat*[10]. This pleased Jumman immensely. He was as happy as a hunter would be, seeing the potential prey heading towards the trap. He replied, "Why not? Even I am fed up with the daily bickering. Let there be an end to this."

Jumman had no doubt of getting a successful verdict in the *panchayat*. There was hardly any local person who was not obliged to him or could dare to incur his wrath. The *panch*[11] had to be a local person only; the angels from heaven were not going to come down to give the verdict.

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For several days, the old *khala* knocked every door in her own and other nearby villages seeking support. With her advanced age and bent spine she needed the support of a walking stick. For her, every step was an ordeal. But there was no choice. She had to have a favourable decision.

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10. A conventional system of dispute resolution in which the village elders nominated by the parties to adjudicate upon the dispute. The decision making body is also called *panchayat*.
11. The member of the *panchayat*

She went and cried before almost everybody she thought who mattered. Some persons made pretence of listening. Some said, "You are so near the death, you should learn to adapt and be content. You don't need anything more than frugal meals. You should spend your time chanting the noble name of Allah[12] and should not bother about land and farming." To some people she had become a subject of satire and derision. It was natural for them to laugh at a person with a bent spine, sunken cheeks and disheveled hair. There were not many kind souls who felt a tinge of sympathy on the agony of the old woman and gave her consolation after patiently hearing her. Totally exhausted and largely disappointed with the general response she had got, she went to Algoo Chowdhari. Discarding her stick aside to get a little respite, she begged, "Child, please do come and attend the *panchayat*."

Algoo said, "I can come but I will not be able to say anything."

Khala asked, "Why so?"

"How do I answer this? This is my sweet will! Jumman is an old friend of mine. I can not spoil my relations with him."

"Child, for the fear of spoiling relations will you cease to be true to *iman*[13]?"

Our lazy conscience often slips into deep slumber unmindful of the steady erosion of ethical and moral values. A chance stinging remark, however, has a potential of acting like a stimulus and challenge to

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12. The Supreme Being as visualized by Muslims.
13. The word used here is *iman*. There is no equivalent in English. It embodies and includes righteous conduct, religious adherence and ethical probity.

awaken it from its restful inactivity. Thus roused, the conscience is unconquerable. Algoo could not answer the question. But the words reverberated in his heart, "For the fear of spoiling relations will you cease to be true to *iman*?"

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People started gathering for the *panchayat* that began to be congregated little before sunset. Sheikh Jumman had made adequate arrangements. A carpet had been arranged. *Paan*[14], cardamom, hubble-bubble had all been catered for. He was sitting little away from Algoo Chowdhari. He would welcome in a restrained manner all those who came for *panchayat*. Sunset was accompanied by the chirping of the birds. It appeared as if the birds were also having a *panchayat* of their own and the village *panchayat* also started at the same time. The available space had all been filled but most of those who were present, were merely spectators. Out of the invited people who had come, a few had to settle scores with Jumman. The village barber was continuously busy in passing on the hubble-bubbles to the members of the congregation. People were busy smoking. The smoke exhaled by the people competed with the smoke from the smouldering cow-dung cakes. The urchins were having good fun running around quarrelling and crying. It was all a noisy affair. Even the village dogs were gathered around mistaking the *panchayat* for a community feast.

The proceedings began with the old *khala* praying to the *panchayat*, "Respectable sirs, three years ago I

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14. Betel leaf

had transferred all my property to my nephew, Jumman. This is known to all of you. In consideration thereof, Jumman had agreed to bear the entire expenditure for my food and clothing for the rest of my life. I am not getting even a mouthful of food nor sufficient clothes to properly cover my body. I cannot approach the courts. The daily denials have exhausted my patience. I have no one besides you to hear my woes. Whatever you decide is acceptable to me. If you find fault with me you can even slap me. If you find fault with Jumman, explain to him that he should not make the life of a shelterless, friendless woman more miserable. The sigh of a helpless person is more potent than any curse. Whatever the *panchayat* decides I would bow before the decision."

After the widow had addressed the congregation, Ramdhan Misra spoke, "Jumman Mian, whom do you nominate as your *panch?* Please decide now. Afterwards you will be bound by the decision of the *panchas.*"

Jumman looked around. He felt that the mostly people there had some animosity or other with him. He tactfully said, "The decision of the *panchayat* is Allah's command and would be fully acceptable to me."

The *khala* said in a raised voice, "I need to know, in the name of Allah, why don't you tell the name of *panch* of your choice?"

This irritated Jumman, "Now don't make me open my month. This is your complaint, you decide who is to be the *panch.*"

Khala understood the meaning hidden in this remark and said, "Child, have some fear of God. A *panch* is nobody's friend and nobody's enemy. In any case you

have respect for Algoo Chowdhari, I suggest that he be the *sarpanch*[15] ."

Jumman Sheikh was naturally happy but he effectively concealed his happiness and said, "For me there is no difference between Ramdhan and Algoo. If *khala* so wants let it be Algoo."

Algoo was not interested in getting into the controversy. He turned to *khala,* "You know that I and Jumman are close friends."

Khala got serious saying, "Child, no body sells his soul for friendship. God resides in the heart and lips of *panchas.* The *pancha's* word reflects the voice of God."

Algoo Chowdhari became the *sarpanch.* Ramdhan Misra and others opposed to Jumman were critical of the old woman in their hearts.

"Sheikh Jumman, let me state that you and I have been old friends and we have stood by each other in the time of need. But today my role is different. You and old *khala* are equal before me and other *panchas.* You can make your submissions keeping that in mind," said Algoo Chowdhari beginning the proceedings.

Jumman was confident that odds were in his favour. He knew that Algoo's statements were meant for public consumption only. In a self assured manner he said, "I accept that three years ago *khala* had transferred her property to me. I also concede that I had promised to look after her legitimate needs of food and clothing. God is my witness, I had never created any problem for her. I have always given her the respect due to a mother. It is my duty to serve her and help her. The women do have some differences amongst them. This is not of my

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15. Head *panch*

making. Now, khala wants a fixed monthly allowance. The extent of the estate transferred to me is known to everybody. Earnings from her assets are not adequate to enable me to give her a monthly allowance. Moreover there was no mention of any monthly allowance in the transfer deed. Decision now rests with you."

Algoo Chowdhari had experience of dealing with court matters and as such had some grounding in legal matters. He started cross-examining Jumman. Every question of his acted like a hammer blow to Jumman. Ramdhan Misra was obviously pleased with this. Jumman was astonished as to what had happened to Algoo. He wondered, "A little while ago, he was sitting with me and sweetly conversing. In a moment there has been so much of a metamorphosis that he is bent upon uprooting me. I wonder what is the cause of all this. The friendship of a lifetime has been of no use."

While Jumman Sheikh was worrying thus, Algoo announced the decision, "Jumman Sheikh, the matter has been duly deliberated upon by us. It appears logical and reasonable that *khalajan* be given monthly allowance for her upkeep. We are of the view that the estate transferred by her earns so much that payment of monthly allowance is possible and should be paid. This is our decision. If Jumman is unwilling to pay the monthly allowance, the transfer deed should be deemed to be void and *khalajan's* property will revert back to her."

This shocked and stunned Jumman. He thought, "How could a friend behave like an enemy and turn a knife on one's neck. These are bad times. The one who could be fully trusted has betrayed me. Only in times like this one comes to know who is a true friend. If people were not so cunning and mean, the country

would not be visited by disasters and epidemics. Plague and cholera are God's punishments to such acts of betrayal by friends."

On the other hand Ramdhan Misra and other *panchas* were praising Algoo Chowdhari's devotion to truth and fairplay. They opined, "This is what is called *panchayat*. The truth and the falsity have been totally separated. Friendship has got its own place but the righteous conduct has to have the primacy. It is only because of truthful and righteous people like Algoo Chowdhari that this planet gets stability otherwise it would have sunken to the netherworld.

This decision shook the friendship of Algoo and Jumman from its roots. Now they were not seen talking animatedly with each other. The old tree of friendship could not withstand the single gale of truth as its roots were in loose silt.

Their relation now became strictly formal. There was outward courtesy but the friendly feeling had gone. They would meet each other as the sword meets the shield.

The betrayal by friend was a continuous sore point in Jumman's heart. He was waiting every moment to take revenge.

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Jumman got an early chance to take revenge. It is strange that well-intentioned prayers take long time to be answered but when one wishes ill of someone, nature listens and answers early. Last year, Algoo had purchased a pair of bullock belonging to a very good breed. The bulls had a majestic look. Their horns were straight and long. The bulls looked so good and impressive that people even from nearby villages would

often come to have a glimpse. As luck would have it, just one month after the *panchayat's* decision one of the bulls died. This immensely pleased Jumman. "This is God's punishment to Algoo for betraying a friend. A man may silently accept an injury or injustice done to him. But God sitting in high heavens watches over everything and dispenses justice" he told his friends. This talk reached Algoo who suspected that the bull might not have died a natural death. He suspected that it might have been poisoned by Jumman as an act of revenge. Algoo's wife made a mention of this suspicion in front of certain other women. The consequence was a big verbal fight. There was a free exchange of invectives, abuses, charges, taunts, insinuations and innuendoes between the two women. Jumman somehow restored the peace by separating his wife from the battle scene. Algoo Chowdhary also convinced his wife that such fights don't help.

To a farmer a single bull is of no use. A bull of comparable height and strength was just not available in the market. One cannot put two bulls of different heights and strength under the same yoke. There was no alternative but to sell the surviving bull. There was a grocer in the village by the name Samjhu, which means the intelligent one. He was more cunning than intelligent. He had not employed anybody to drive his bullock cart and would do the job himself. He would purchase jaggery, clarified butter and other village produces and take it on the bullock cart to the *mandi*[16]

16. A market where the agricultural produce and other goods including chattels are brought for sale.

in the nearby main town for selling it at a profit. On the return journey he would bring kerosene oil, common salt and other such items to sell in the village. He would normally make one round trip daily. When he saw Algoo's bull he was really tempted to purchase it. He thought that with this strong bull he could make three round trips in a day. He made thorough examination and inquiry about the worth of the bull and then settled the price after much haggling. He did not pay any cash even though he had taken the delivery and custody of the bull. The price was agreed to be paid after a month. Algoo Chowdhary was in such an unpleasant position that he accepted the lower price and deferred payment.

Samjhu, the grocer, over-worked the newly acquired bull. Instead of the normal one round trip he would undertake three or four trips daily. The bull was overworked and fatigued yet it was given meager and inadequate dry fodder. The grocer was not even bothered to let the poor animal have its fill of plain water because he was always in an unholy hurry to make another trip. The poor beast was treated in a beastly manner.

In Algoo Chowdhari's house, life was quite comfortable for the bull. The gentleman treated the animal gently. It would get clean potable water, grounded pulses, oil-cake along with fodder and rice husk. Sometimes when Algoo was in a good mood the bull would get to taste even clarified butter. One man had been specifically employed to scrub the bull's body clean every morning and evening. The man would even fondle the bull with affection. While the comfort was great, the work required to be done was hardly any.

The bull would be yoked only for ploughing and leveling the field. After the harvest the bull would be made to pound the grains with its feet for winnowing. Such jobs occur only twice or thrice a year. Naturally, the bull would enjoy running even for miles. Now bad days were in store for the bull under the ownership of the grocer. Overworked and under nourished, the bull was starved to a skeleton. The mere sight of the bullock cart was dreadful to him. Somehow he managed to survive being of a better and stronger breed and having been well nourished earlier. But there is a limit to everything.

One day, it was the fourth trip and the load on the vehicle was about double the normal load. The bull was too weak to move even a step. The grocer had no sympathy for the poor animal. He was in a hurry. He let out a flurry of whipping on the poor animal. The bull managed to move a few steps then halted to fill his lungs with a little air for sustenance. Even this delay was not acceptable to the greedy grocer. His whip moved fast with all the cruelty at his command. The bull made one final attempt to move but its body had reached its limit. It collapsed and fell and never got up again. The animal was dead. The grocer got down from the cart and kept on whipping the dead animal not knowing that there was no life in it and dead animals don't move. The grocer pulled its legs. Even shoved his stick in the nostril of dead animal. Naturally he found no sign of movement. Only then did he realize that the bull was dead. He separated the bull from the cart and started thinking about how to reach home with the cart and the grocery.

The story relates to the period when there was no

electricity in the villages and by sunset all village roads would wear a deserted look. He cried and shouted for help to reach home but no one heard him. There were no houses nearby and no traveller happened to pass by that side. The grocer did not know how to reach home, he had sold goods worth two hundred and fifty rupees[17]. The money was tied in a cloth, which was wrapped around his waist. That was one of the customary systems of keeping large sums in a journey. There were many sacs of salt loaded on the cart. He could not even leave the cart and walk home. The feeling of helplessness further infuriated him and he took out his anger on the poor dead animal by cursing and whipping the dead body. He was really sore that the bull had died on the way and he thought that if the bull had to die it should have died after carrying the load home. Now, there was no alternative except to spend a sleepless night there in that desolate place. But he was feeling sleepy. To keep awake, he kept on smoking with his hubble-bubble, which he used to carry with him on his journeys. Though he didn't want to sleep, he slumbered off after midnight. When the rays of the rising sun awoke him, his right hand instinctively moved to his waist where the money pouch had been kept. It was missing. He found that many of the oil canisters were also missing. He banged his head with both hands and felt like fainting. He started walking towards his home crying all the way. When his wife heard the story her reaction was really typical. Instead of blaming her husband for ill-treating and starving the bull, she started

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17. At that time a rupee went a long way and two hundred fifty rupees was considered as king's ransom.

cursing and abusing Algoo Chowdhari for having palmed off an ill-starved bull that caused the loss of their lifetime earnings.

Many months passed, Whenever Algoo would ask for the price of the bull, the grocer and his wife would pounce on him like irritated dogs. They would howl, "Look! We have lost our entire life's earnings and have been totally ruined because of the ill-omened beast that you gave us and now you want its price. You have really fooled and cheated us. But we are no fools. After all we are born *banias*[18] and cannot be fooled. Even if you go and take bath in the village swamp as an act of penance we are not going to pay you any money. We have used your bull for one month, you can use our bull for two months, this is the maximum we can offer," they would howl.

There were many who were happy at Algoo Chowdhari's misfortune. On occasions like this, they would gather to enjoy the fun and would even support the grocer. It was not easy to forego the agreed price of the bull, which was rupees one hundred and fifty and constituted a considerable sum during those times. Once, he also got infuriated and used appropriate expletives and abusive words. He even wanted to hit him really hard and made a gesture to that effect. The grocer went inside his home to look for a *lathi*[19] to hit Algoo. In the meantime, the grocer's wife continued the fight with full gusto. When she got a little exhausted with the fight she went inside the house and locked herself in. The

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18. Trader class
19. Fighting stick

husband had not found the *lathi* so far. The commotion had made many people gather. Some of them tried to help disputants arrive at a compromise. The grocer was assured by the crowd that he would not be allowed to be physically damaged when he came out of the house. The people present advised both the disputing persons to approach the *panchayat* for resolving the dispute. They were advised that whatever be the decision of the *panchayat* it should be honoured and respected by both the disputants. Algoo and the grocer agreed to this.

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Panchayat was scheduled for the day after the following day, under the same tree where the previous *panchayat* had been held. Both sides started soliciting for support. Finally, the time for *panchayat* came. It was a similar sunset. The congregation of the crows sitting on the treetops was vehemently arguing an important issue. The subject of the discussion was whether or not they had ownership rights on the pea pods in the farms. Since the subject of ownership was disputed the crows considered that the caretaker had no business to object to their eating and enjoying the pea pods. They had a right to protest at the non-cooperative and unreasonable attitude of farmers. The assembly of parrots had a very relevant question to ask of the humans. They were aggrieved that the men called the parrots faithless while it was other way around. A human would normally not hesitate to ditch a friend if it suited his purpose.

The *panchayat* of humans started its proceedings with Ramdhan Misra proposing that the *panchas* and the *sarpanch* be chosen. Firstly, he asked Algoo Chowdhari for his choice, who humbly suggested that let it be decided by the grocer.

The grocer stood up arrogantly and said in a stentorian voice, "Jumman Sheikh is my choice." This made Algoo Chowdhari's heart pound with apprehension and fear. The effect was analogous to that of a heavy slap. Ramdhan understood the unarticulated feeling of Algoo, being his sincere friend. He asked Algoo, "Do you have any objection?"

"No. Why should I have any objection?" said Chowdhari in a dejected manner.

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The realization of our true responsibility is a great corrective. When in life's journey we lose our bearings the awareness of our responsibility acts as the polestar.

A newspaper editor sitting in the comfort of his office may make a forceful, critical, pungent and hard hitting comment against the government in power. He uses the power of the pen with full force of language at his command. But if he himself, happens to become a minister, the world-view changes. The same writing skill earlier used for innuendos and invectives is now used for thoughtful analysis. Now, he becomes interested in fairplay, justice and equipoise. The reason lies in the awareness of responsibility. Likewise, the adolescence is a period of rebellion. This worries the parents; some of the parents think their children to be blots on the fair name of the family. But when the same adolescents grow up and face the responsibility of supporting a family their unbridled mind becomes full of peace and repose. This is the effect of the awareness of responsibility.

A similar effect occurred in the mind of Jumman Sheikh when he took the oath of being fair and unbiased while assuming the responsibility of *sarpanch*. He felt that he had been put on the high pedestal of justice sanctified by ethics and religion. He felt that everyone expected him to utter the words expected of divinity.

He thought, "God's divinity cannot be allowed to be profaned with the low feelings in my mind. I must strive to stay true to justice and should not deviate from adherence to truth even by a small bit."

Jumman and other *panchas* started cross-examining both the disputants. After the queries it was everyone's view that the grocer should pay the cost of the bull. Two of the five *panchas* felt that since the bull had ultimately died, the seller should give some concession to the purchaser. In contradiction to this, two other *panchas* were outraged at the cruelty caused to the poor animal and wanted exemplary punishment to the grocer so that in future nobody would dare to treat helpless animals with such heartlessness. In the end Jumman read out the decision–

"Algoo Chowdhari and Samjhu, the grocer; we have heard both of you and have fully deliberated upon the dispute. We consider it fair and reasonable that Samjhu should pay the full-agreed amount to Algoo Chowdhari. When the transaction took place, the bull was not sick. If the money had been paid at that time there would have been no problem and no dispute. There would have been no question of Samjhu asking for a refund after the bull's death. The *panchayat* is firmly of the view that the bull had died entirely because of inadequate

food coupled with over-exertion beyond its normal capability."

"This is a deliberate killing of the poor animal. Samjhu must be penalized for this," said Ramdhan Misra.

"This is a different issue. This has not been referred to us and is not the dispute before us," Jumman replied.

Jhagdu was another grocer sitting there and naturally had a feeling of kinship with Samjhu. He pleaded for some concession on the agreed sale price.

Jumman gave his decision that *panchayat* would not direct Algoo to give any concession. "The full money has to be paid. However, if Algoo in his magnanimity, agrees to give some concession, that is his sweet will."

Algoo Chowdhari could not contain his happiness. He stood up and hailed the *panchas* for their glorious decision. He said, *"Panch Parmeshwar ki jai!"*[20]

This found an echo in every lip and every throat.

Everyone was full of praise for Jumman. Everyone felt that this was truly justice. Everyone was convinced that this was proof enough that God lives in the heart of *panchas*. It is God's glory that is manifested in the words of the *panchas*. It is with God's grace that they can naturally distinguish between truth and falsehood.

A little while later, on the same day, Jumman went to Algoo and affectionately embraced him saying, "When you acted as a *panch* and gave decision against me I had lost all friendly feelings for you and became

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20. Glory be to the divine *panchas*

almost a deadly enemy. But today when I was elevated to the *panchas* position the realization dawned on me that a *pancha* has no friend and no enemy. He cannot think of anything other than justice. Today I am convinced that a *pancha* is simply an instrument of Almighty God."

Algoo could not restrain the tears flowing from his eyes. The tears washed away all animosity. The withered plant of friendship turned green again. The adherence to truth and justice, which had damaged the friendship, was now restored again.

The Meek Do Not Inherit the Earth (*Sadgati*)

Introduction

This story is a reminder of the curse of social stratification of Hindu society, which made a significant population worst than the animals. Even the touch of a low caste was considered as polluting them by the higher caste. There was no escape from the injustice of the caste system for the poor untouchables except death. Guru Gobind Singh three hundred years back had said, "*Rangrete Guru ke bete*", which means the low caste persons are the children of the *Guru*. The Hindu society did not make tangible effort to rid itself of the curse of casteism till Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar stirred the conscious of the community. The constitution makes untouchability illegal. Protection of Civil Rights Act makes atrocities against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes a culpable offence. But still we have miles to go before assimilating our unfortunate brethren.

Following the religious rituals and reading the scriptures or reciting them by rote does not make anyone pious. Premchand has articulated this view with rare compassion. The story exposes the hollowness of the claims of superiority of higher castes and conveys an implicit message that the low caste Hindus are in more ways than one better human beings.

Dukhi, the leather worker, was sweeping the open space in front of his hut. His wife Jhuria was busy applying a coat of dung wash.[1] A little while later when both of them had finished the job of making their humble abode a little more presentable, Jhuria requested her husband, "Please go and request *Pandit Baba*[2] to come before he leaves for somewhere else."

"Okay, I will go but we don't have anything worthwhile for him to sit on."

"Can't we borrow a small cot from somewhere? Why don't you borrow it from *Thakur's*[3] house?"

"Sometimes what you say really singes the skin. We are not even allowed to borrow fire or water from *Thakur's* house and you are talking of borrowing a cot. Even when I am dying of thirst, I know I cannot even get a bit of water to quench my thirst. Who will lend me a cot? We are untouchables but they can take dung-cakes, reeds, husk and wood from us as often as they

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1. It is customary to apply cow dung mixed with water on the dried mud flooring to fill the cracks and improve the surface. This is also a necessary exercise before certain religious rituals in some parts.
2. Baba is an honorific title for holy men that means father. Pandits are hereditary priests as per caste system.
3. Landlord

want it. You just wash our own small cot and leave it to dry in the sun. By the time Panditji comes it will be totally dry."

"He is not going to sit on our cot even if we wash it. Have you not noticed how punctilious he is in observing the religious rituals?"

Dukhi replied in a worried tone, "I do agree. Anyway let me make a plate from *mahua* leaves. The plate made of *mahua* leaves is used by even the high castes for eating food. No untouchability attaches to it. Give me the stick so that I can remove some leaves from the tree."

"I can do that work. You just go to Panditji's house. But listen, we do have to give him the uncooked grains as an offering. I will keep this offering in our own metal plate."

"Don't commit this sacrilege. He may throw away the plate as well as the grains. He is prone to get angry. He doesn't even spare his wife. One day he gave such a bashing to his own son that he had a fracture in his wrist. The grain should also be made in the plate made with *mahua* leaves. Be careful, not to touch it. You request the daughter of Jhuri *Gond*[4] to go and get it from the grocer's shop. Don't be miser in purchasing the ritual offerings. One seer wheat flour, half a seer rice, a quarter seer pulse, two *chhatak*[5] of clarified butter, some salt and a little bit of turmeric powder should be placed on the plate made of leaves and don't forget to

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4. Jhuri is the name of the person being referred to. Gond specifies a caste group, which is higher in the social hierarchy than chamars, the leatherworkers. Gonds are not untouchables.
5. One sixteenth of a seer.

put a four *anna*[6] coin. If you cannot find *Gond's* daughter, then request *Bhurjin*[7] with folded hands to accompany you. Be careful and don't touch anything yourself. It may get serious otherwise."

After duly instructing his wife, Dukhi picked up some firewood and a large pile of grass for going to Panditji's house. One cannot go to a Pandit's house without carrying something as a gift. Poor Dukhi had nothing besides grass and firewood, which he could give to Panditji. If he had gone without carrying even these two things he might have been welcomed with caustic abuses.

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Pandit Ghasiram was a great devotee of God. He would waste no time after getting up in the morning to start his ritual of worship. The real worship would start at around eight after getting free from ablutions. It began with grinding cannabis. After this half an hour would be spent in wet grinding of sandalwood. Sandalwood paste so made was used for making the holy signs on his forehead and body. With small straw dipped in thin paste he would draw two lines on his forehead. Exactly at the centre of the forehead between these two lines he would make a red dot from powdered *roli*[8] . This would be followed by the drawing of rings of sandalwood paste on his arms and chest. After anointing himself thus he would take out the statuette of the god to give it a ceremonial bath and anoint it with sandalwood thereafter. Then he would make offering of flowers

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6. One sixteenth of a rupee.
7. The woman who roasts gram and groundnut in hot sand.
8. Mixture of turmeric and lime.

before reciting his prayer to the idol. This would be punctuated with tinkling of bell. By ten, the job of worship would be over and as a finishing touch to the worship he would imbibe the cannabis ground earlier. By this time a couple of devotees would be waiting for him with gifts, which constituted good harvest for the time and effort spent in his professed piety.

When after completing the ritual and imbibing the customary quantity of cannabis, Panditji came out he saw Dukhi, the leatherworker, sitting on the floor by the side of the pile of grass and fuel wood he had brought. Seeing Panditji Dukhi respectfully stood up, folded his hands and thereafter prostrated himself on the ground as a mark of extreme respect. His reverence knew no bounds. Panditji had a radiant personality inspiring veneration. He looked divine with a small round profile, hairless pate, bloated cheeks and radiant eyes. He looked divine with the signs painted with sandalwood and *roli*. He asked Dukhi with his lotus lips, "What brings you here, Dukhia?"

Dukhi bowed his head and said, "I have to do the betrothal ceremony of my daughter. Please do me the favour by telling the auspicious time for the same. When can you come to my hut?"

Ghasiram said, "Today I am not free. However I will come by the sunset."

"No my lord, I would be obliged if you come early. I have made all essential arrangements. Where do I keep this pile of grass?"

"Put it in the manger in front of the cow. And listen! Pick up the broom and sweep the area outside the house. The visitors' room has not been properly maintained for so many days. Apply a coat of cow-dung wash on the floor. In the meanwhile I will finish my

breakfast. I will need a little rest before I accompany you. There is a wooden log lying outside, cut it into small pieces for use as fuel, also go to our farm and bring four buckets of husk and put it in the storage room for the husk."

Dukhi immediately got into the act. He swept the area outside the house and applied cow-dung wash to the floor of visitors' room. It was noon by the time Panditji had gone inside kitchen for having his meals. Dukhi had not had even a morsel of food since the morning. He was feeling terribly hungry and there was nothing to eat. His own house was a mile away. He knew that if he left the job and went home for food, Panditji would get angry. Poor Dukhi somehow controlled his pangs of hunger and got busy in splitting the log of wood. The log had a big hard knot and it was not easy to split it. Many devotees had earlier tried to split it and failed. The iron of the axe was unequal to the task of splitting the wood. Dukhi knew how to cut grass and sell it in the market. He had no experience as a woodcutter. Grass is humble it bows down before the sickle. He used all the force at his command but he was not even able to make a dent with the axe on the knot in the wood. The wood was so hard that the axe would turn around the handle.

Dukhi was sweating profusely. His huffing and puffing indicated his extreme tiredness. Fully exhausted he sat down for a little while to catch some breath then got up again, picked up the axe and then tried again. He did this several times. He was feeling giddy. He felt as if there was darkness at noon. In spite of feeling very dizzy he could not leave the job. He thought if he could have a little puff of tobacco smoke, it might give him sustenance. Then he thought hardly anyone would

allow him the use of his tobacco or his chillum. He knew that the Brahmins lived in that area. Their style of smoking is also superior to that of low castes. He suddenly recalled that a person belonging to Gond caste lived in that area and he would be having chillum and tobacco and would not mind lending the same to him. He rushed towards the Gond's house. The Gond was very helpful he gave tobacco and the chillum but unfortunately there was no fire[9] in his house.

Dukhi said, "Don't worry about the fire. I can request Panditji for the same. Cooking was being done a little while ago and fire should be available."

Dukhi had tobacco and chillum with him and needed only the fire to ignite tobacco. He stood outside the Panditji's house and said, "My lord, if you can give me a little bit of fire I would be able to have a little smoke."

Panditji was having his meals. His wife asked him, "Who is this man outside asking for fire?"

Panditji said, "The same Dukhia *chamar*[10]. I have asked him to split a small log of wood. Give him some fire if you can manage."

Panditain[11] raised his eyebrows and said, "You have been busy reading the religious books and have forgotten the essentials of religious practice. Be it a

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9. The story pertains to the period before the advent of Lucifer matches. The customary method of making fire was to rub stones. The fire thus ignited would be kept burning in a fireplace or kerosene lamp.
10. The leather workers were disparagingly called chamar by other communities. We have reluctantly retained this pejorative expression as to do otherwise would have taken the sting out of the story and blurred the characterization.
11. Pandit's wife

leatherworker or a washerman or a fowler anybody can come to our house as if it is not a Hindu's home but an inn. Tell that wretched fellow to get away otherwise I will scald his face with a burning piece of wood. How dare he come and ask for fire?"

Panditji tried to explain the matters and said, "Try to understand he has not touched anything. He is just standing on the ground. His being untouchable doesn't damage the earth. Earth is so sacred its sacredness cannot be taken away by anybody. Do give him a little fire. Don't forget that he is splitting our wood. If this job was done by a regular woodcutter he would have taken four *annas*."

Panditain roared, "Why did he come to our house?"

Panditji said in a defeated tone, "It is his misfortune what else?"

Panditain said, "Well, I will give the fire today but in future if anybody dares ask for fire I am going to burn his face."

Dukhi heard all this He regretted having come. He realized his mistake. He regretted that after having spent his entire life in the village he could not understand even the basic truth that the Pandits are so high and so sacred as to be worshipped by rest of the world.

When Panditain came out with fire he felt as if he had got a gift from the heavens. He folded his hands and bent down to touch the ground with his forehead saying, "It was my mistake to have come here. Afterall I am a *chamar* with limited brains! We would not be kicked around if we were not so foolish."

Panditain had brought burning ember held with a pair of tongs. She threw it towards Dukhi from a distance. She was wearing the customary veil and could not even see where the ember was landing. A piece of ember fell on Dukhi's head. He felt that he has got the

punishment for having defiled the purity of a high Brahmin with his impure presence. He thought that, 'God has been quick in His retribution. That is the reason that the entire world respects and is afraid of Brahmins. Anyone can be cheated of his money but nobody can deprive a Brahmin of his cash and get away. His entire property will be destroyed. Even his limbs would start decaying.'

He came out, smoked the chillum and got busy in splitting the wood in real earnest.

Panditain had seen an ember falling on Dukhi's scalp. She did feel a momentary tinge of compassion for Dukhi. After Panditji had taken his food she suggested, "Give some food to this *chamar*. He has been working for a long time and must be hungry by now."

Panditji was more practical. He asked, "Are there spare *rotis*[12] ?"

"May be two or four," replied Panditain.

"That would not be sufficient for him. He is a low caste worker and can easily consume a seer of *rotis*."

This much magnanimity was not possible for Panditain. She touched her ears as a gesture of surprise and said, "Oh my father! A seer of *rotis*! Then forget it"

Panditji made a display of large heartedness and said, "Mix some bran with wheat flour and make two thick heavy *rotis* that may be sufficient for him. They normally consume thick *rotis* of millet[13] flour."

"I can not make it in this much of heat. Forget about giving any food to him," said the Panditain.

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12. Chapattis
13. Millet being cheaper than wheat and rice was the staple food of poor people.

Dukhi had his smoke and picked up the axe. He felt a strange power surging through him. He kept on striking the hardwood with full force for about half an hour and then he felt breathless and weak. He sat down clasping his head in his palms. Gond came in the meantime and said, "Give up the task old man. You are too old to split this wood. This is going to be a futile effort."

Dukhi wiped sweat from his forehead and said, "I have to carry a cart full of husk from the farm to the house also."

Gond asked, "Have they given you something to eat or do they enjoy getting free labour. Why don't you go and ask for something to eat?"

"What are you telling? How can we digest a Brahmin's food?

"Why not? But firstly they should give it. Pandit has enjoyed his ample lunch. Given a twist to his moustaches and having a siesta and you are busy in splitting the un-splittable wood. Even the *zamindar*[14] who owns the farms gives poor something to eat. Even when government officials ask you to do some work, it is not totally free. They compensate you. They may give a pittance but they do give it. Pandit is worst than them and then makes a show of religiosity."

"Please speak slowly. It will be a misery if he hears us."

Dukhi got up to make another attempt to split the log. Gond felt compassion for Dukhi and for half an hour he himself tried to split the wood. Then he threw away the axe saying, "You may give up your life trying to split it but you are not going to succeed."

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14. The landlord

Dukhi started thinking, 'How long am I going to try splitting the wood? I am not able to make even a small crack in it. There are hundred tasks left undone in my own house. I think I will give up splitting the wood and do it tomorrow. For today I may carry the husk. I will explain to Panditji that inspite of my best efforts I could not do it and will do it tomorrow.'

He picked up the basket. The farm was at a distance of two furlongs. The job would have been finished early if it was possible to fill the basket fully. But then if a basket is fully filled it becomes so heavy that one needs assistance of another person to lift it from the ground and place it on ones head. By four in the evening he finished the task of carrying the husk. He felt sleep overpowering him inspite of hunger. Panditji had got up by now and after washing his face helped himself to a *paan*[15] and chewing the same he came out. He got angry when he saw Dukhi sleeping with the basket as a pillow. He shouted, "Dukhia why are you sleeping? What have you been doing for the entire day? You have not split the wood, you have only carried a handful of husk and now you have started sleeping. Get up and pick up the axe. You can't even do this little job and you expect me to find an auspicious time for your daughter's engagement. That is why people say that when a lowly person becomes a little comfortable he loses respect for others."

Dukhi got up and again picked up the axe. He forgot all that he had undergone. Since morning, he did not even have a morsel of food or a sip of water. He had not even the time for it. Getting up itself was very difficult,

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15. Betel leaves.

as difficult as climbing on a steep mountain. His heart was sinking but he told himself that he must not displease Panditji afterall he was to suggest an auspicious time after seeing the stars, a suitable time for his daughters engagement. Any mistake in that might be unfortunate. The world respects the Pandits only because of their ability of finding the right time for doing right thing. Panditji stood nearby and encouraged him to make full effort to split the wood. He exhorted him time and again to continue with his efforts.

Dukhi was not in control of himself. There was some mysterious force making his hands move. He had forgotten his tiredness, his fatigue, his hunger, his weakness. He was amazed at the strength that was surging through his limbs. He continued striking the axe in a frenzied manner. Ultimately there developed a crack in the middle of the log. Simultaneously he felt his head spinning. The axe fell from his hands. The hunger, the thirst and the fatigue had proved too much for the body.

Panditji was still not satisfied, "Get up and make little more effort. You must convert this wood into small chips suitable for burning as fuel wood."

Dukhi did not get up. Panditji thought that it is not proper to disturb him for sometime. Panditji went inside the house and had his evening quota of cannabises and thereafter had his bath. He dressed in the customary dress of the Pandits and came out. He found that Dukhi was still lying on the ground. He said in a loud voice, "Get up, let us go to your house. I hope you have organized everything."

Dukhi did not get up. Panditji had a little doubt. He went somewhat closer to Dukhi and found him lying stiff. He lost his cool and rushed to Panditain and said, "I think Dukhia is dead."

Panditain was startled and said, "Little while ago he was busy in cutting the wood."

"Yes, he was and he died while doing it. But what do we do now?"

Panditain said in an undisturbed manner, "Send a message in *chamrauna*[16] to take away the dead body."

The entire village came to know of Dukhia's death in no time. The entire locality was inhabited by Brahmins and only one house was that of a Gond. This was quite a problem. The dead body lay on the route to the village well. How could people go to fetch water as it entailed moving by the side of the dead body of the *chamar?* An old woman came and told Panditji why don't you do something to get the dead body thrown away. Otherwise nobody can have water from the well.

The Gond had told the people in *chamrauna* not to pick up the dead body. He had said "Be careful, don't pick up the dead body. There is going to be police inquiry. They have caused the death of a poor man. They may be Pandits but are not above the law. If you pick up the dead body the Police may haul you up for disturbing the evidence."

Nobody came from *chamrauna* to pick up the dead body. Dukhi's daughter and wife accompanied by a few other women of their community sat outside the Pandit's house and cried and cursed. Panditji first tried to threaten and then persuaded them without avail.

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16. Area where low caste people used to live.

They banged their head with their hands and continued wailing till midnight. Neither the Brahmin nor the gonds could sleep. Nobody from Dukhi's community came to pick up the dead body. The Pandits could not lift it. There is no scriptural authority that a high caste Brahmin could move away the dead body of a low caste leather worker.

Panditain was really irritated and said, "These witches are shouting relentlessly. They are not even getting tired. My head seems to be bursting at the noise."

Pandit said, "Let the witches cry. They are ultimately going to get tired. They might not have bothered about him when he was alive but they all have come to create ruckus now."

"The crying of a leather worker is inauspicious."

" Yes, I agree it is very inauspicious."

"The foul smell is emanating from the body."

"The wretch was a low caste person. They could eat anything".

"These women are continuing sitting there by the side of dead body. Don't they feel it nauseating?"

"They are all polluted people."

The night somehow was over. No male came from Dukhi's community to pick up the body. The women folk left exhausted and tired. The foul smell from the dead body increased.

Panditji took a rope and tied it around the ankles and feet of the dead body with one end. It was still some darkness. He started dragging the dead body and took it out of the village. After returning he took bath,

worshipped goddess Durga and sprinkled *Gangajal*[17] in his home to purify it.

The dead body of Dukhi was lying in a field outside the village. The jackals, the vouchers, the dogs and the crows were biting it for morsels of food. This was the reward of a lifetime of devotion, worship, service and dedication.

17. Water of the holy river Ganges.

The Music from Within
(*Atmsangeet*)

Introduction

It is well known that Premchand gave voice to the voiceless and articulated the unsaid anguish of the poor, the meek and the deprived. He certainly did that. But he did much more than that.

The following story has a mystical message from the core of Hinduism, which we know; is not a monolithic religion with a single book, a sole prophet and single road to salvation. However, it is not polytheism or henotheism. It can be described as polymorphous monotheism. To achieve some specific purpose–which is to establish the rule of *Dharma*–the Supreme Being sends His incarnation or manifestation to the world. Since the human mind cannot comprehend the immensity of the Almighty, it is possible and permissible to worship some incarnation or manifestation of the Supreme Being, perceiving it to be endowed with all attributes of the Almighty or the universal consciousness. One may achieve bliss or salvation if devotion is real, focused and intense.

One of the several pathways to God is *Bhaktiyoga*. In *Bhaktiyoga* there is an intense urge to merge one's identity, one's very existence with the Supreme Being, as the human soul is perceived to have a divine origin.

The recollection of this celestial origin abides deep

in the mind and when it seems to slumber — drugged as it were by the fair shows of the world, the pleasure of the visible things and the intoxication of senses — it now and again awakens... full of yearning to recover the sweet serenity of its pristine condition. Then the soul begins to discriminate and perceive that the love which was its innermost principle, has been lavished on empty and futile objects; it grows wearied of things sensual, fake and unending; it longs to fix its affection on that which shall be stable and the source of true and eternal delights. The human soul then wants to be one with the comic consciousness — The *Parmatma*.

It is widely believed that one needs a *Guru*–the preceptor–to guide one through the soul's uncertain journey. Hinduism accords a prime place to *Guru*. Saint Kabir says, when one sees God and *Guru* standing together, one should first touch the feet of *Guru*. This is because it is the *Guru* who has made it possible to have a communication with God. The Sufis assign the same primacy to *murshid,* the spiritual guide. There is also a Hindu belief that there is the virtually un-passable river –*Vaitarni* encountered as an impediment in soul's spiritual journey. Burden of the past sins make the crossing all the more difficult. One's noble deeds or the blessings of the *Guru* help one to cross it. *Guru* is naturally likened to a boatman.

The disciple is expected to sacrifice all the worldly wealth, forego all mental longings on the command of the *Guru*. The true *Guru*–one who has realized God–does not accept any gift, big or small. One who has realized the ultimate bliss does not need anything. He cannot ask for anything.

Exalted saints talk about an *anahat* music. It is believed to be celestial music, which is eternal, unbroken

and unending. It is sheer bliss to be able to hear or feel it. It is a sure sign of spiritual progress. Like God, His *anahat* music is all pervading. One may wonder in the wilderness searching for it and yet may find it emanating or resonating from the core of one's being, one's own soul. This is called *Atm Sangeet*, the music from within.

It was the midnight hour. There was stillness and darkness all around. The silvery image of the stars in the sky playfully danced on the ripples of the river. Everything was calm and tranquil. However, there were faint notes of an alluring and soul satisfying music permeating and engulfing the earth below and the heavens above.

Queen Manorama, earlier that day, had been initiated into the mysteries of the faith by her spiritual mentor, the Guruji. The entire day was spent in the rituals, fasting and acts of charity and beneficence. She got tired and had dozed off to a pleasant sleep. After sometime she woke up to the pleasant notes of an enchanting music. It had strange effect on her. She felt as if she was being pulled by the source of music like an ant is pulled by the aroma of sugar or moth by the light of a lamp. She got up and slipped out, unnoticed, out of the palace.

On the way there were thorny bushes, uneven ground and dangerous animals howling and growling in the wilderness. Queen Manorama was paragon of delicacy and tenderness but she neither noticed nor cared for the impediments on the way driven as she was with an obsessive urge to reach the source of music.

She kept on moving for hours together till she found that the river itself stood between her and the source of the music. She could go no further.

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She helplessly looked around. She saw a boat tied by the river bank. She asked the boatman, "This divine symphony coming from the other side of the river has made me restless. Please help me to go close to it."

The boatman said, "I cannot take my boat into the river today. The stormy winds and the frighteningly high waves make it risky to cross the river."

"I am Manorama, the queen. Please take me to the other side. I will give you whatever you care to ask."

"If you are the queen then it is all the more reason that I should decline. Queens are not destined to travel in boats in such a stormy weather."

"I beseech you. Please hurry up and take me there. My soul is being pulled in that direction"

"What will you give me as a reward?"

"Whatever you care to ask."

"You decide that. I am a poor, ignoramus person. I do not know what can be asked from a queen that commensurates with her status and dignity."

"Here is my necklace. Take it. It is very costly." She removed the necklace to give it to the boatman. The radiance of the pure pearls seemed to make the dark wrinkled face of the boatman glow into a smile.

Suddenly Manorama felt that the source of the melodious music was getting nearer. She felt as if the divine music was emanating from some holy personage who had realized God. The queen felt blessed and blissful. She impatiently begged the boatman to untie the boat from the shore and take her across the river.

The boatman was unmoved. He asked, "What shall I do with this necklace?"

"These are true pearls."

"Then it is a real misery. If my wife wears it, every woman in the neighbourhood will feel jealous. If a thief were to see it, there may be dacoity in my thatched hut, which is in a desolate place. People may even accuse me of having stolen it. I don't want the necklace."

"Then you may ask for something else, but please don't delay. My patience is running out. I cannot bear to wait. Every single note of this sonorous music is stirring my soul and pulling me towards it."

"I want something better than this."

"You are very cruel. You are keeping me busy in unnecessary chatter. Whatever I give you, you don't want and you are not telling what you want yourself. You do not understand what is happening in the recesses of my disparaging mind and forlorn soul. I can give up everything for this extraterrestrial music."

"What else can you give me?"

"At present there is nothing more valuable with me. But I do promise that I will give you my palace. You might have seen it. It is made of pure white marble of the highest quality. There is nothing like that in entire India."

The boatman said laughingly, "What pleasure do I derive by living in your palace? Even my own brothers and other close relatives will become my enemies. At present I lie down in my boat with a completely tranquil mind even during the storms. I have no fear even during the darkest of nights. The gift of the palace is capable of ending my peace of mind in a single day. My entire family can stay confined to one small corner of that big mansion. Where do I get the people to occupy the rest

of the palace? Where do I get the servants to clean and repair the entire building? If I accept this gift, the high domes of the palace will become a nesting place for pigeons and other birds. The beautifully tended flowers will wither away and the entire garden will become the play ground of jackals. "

Manorama was startled into the feeling that the music had come nearer. Its beauty and charm had become more pronounced. It was analogous to a translucent glow of radiant lamp. What was an attraction earlier had now become a mad craving. Manorama was really not able to contain her intense eagerness to reach the source of the dulcet music. She said, "Boatman, you may ask for anything but you must take me to the source of these divine notes. The tune appears to be reminiscent of the longing borne out of deep feelings of separation from beloved. The strains of this sonorous music are pulling me just as water is pulled down by the force of gravity, as the vapours of perfume get eager to escape into the atmosphere. I am as much restless as that. This music has the careless abandon of a cuckoo, the anguish of a *papiha*[1] , the restlessness of *shyama*. It has got the force of springs and storms. It has got everything that can purify the heart, soothe the soul and sharpen wisdom and the discernment. I cannot wait a moment longer. The delay is as painful to me as death. I know the source of the music is nearby, the music which has got the glow of the lamp and the smell of sweet flowers."

"I told you, I have no attraction for your palace. My hut is most comfortable."

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1. Bird gazing towards the sky and craving for the first rain droplet.

"Oh! What do I give you? This is not mere music. It is the essence of all the flowers in the world. This is the purity and the piety of the entire earth. It is the sweetness inherent in everything that is pleasant. It is sheer bliss. Please untie the boat and start. I promise you that I will be your lifelong servant. I will sweep your hut. I will clean your paths. I will decorate your hut with flowers. I will rub your wife's feet with perfumes. My dear boatman I can sacrifice a hundred lives for this music. For God's sake don't decline and disappoint me. There is fire in my desire. My patience has reached the breaking point. I bow before you."

Like a mad woman, Manorama, fell down on the feet of the boatman. Suddenly she felt as if the song was like a big lamp spreading light all around and moving towards her. She felt enveloped and engulfed by it. Every pore of her body felt as if touched by the divine light. She started singing as if intoxicated. She felt as if she was flying in the Milky Way and could see the constellations of stars on both sides. It was a strange feeling, something like forgetfulness and an awakening. That inebriating music, those alluring notes now started emanating from her lips. She felt ambrosia in those notes and on her lips. She herself was the source of the music. The soul satisfying music, the alluring sounds were not coming from elsewhere; she was herself the source.

Manorama's face was radiant like full moon and the light of love emanated from her eyes.

"Premchand's stories present panoply of emotions. Love and hate, sacrifice and selfishness, courage and cowardice, devotion and waywardness, ambition and otherworldliness, mercy and cruelty are interwoven in the warp and weft of his stories. He has depicted the degeneracy of the society and yet he believes in the potential of the human spirit to sore above the empyrean heights.

This volume contains ten stories, each different from the other; each complete in itself. Each seeking to stir our souls, awaken our conscience and make us think.

The stories are timeless as human nature is unchanging."

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